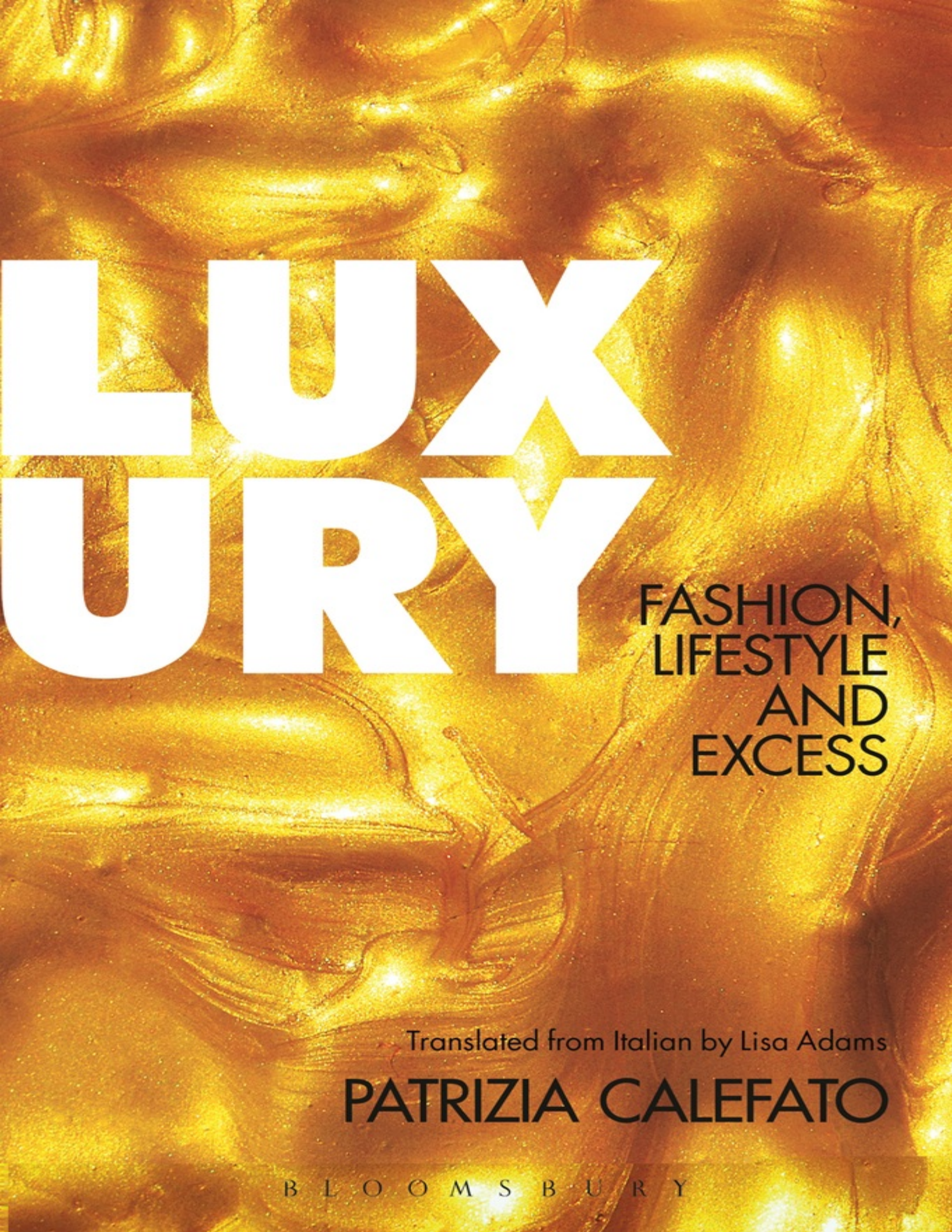
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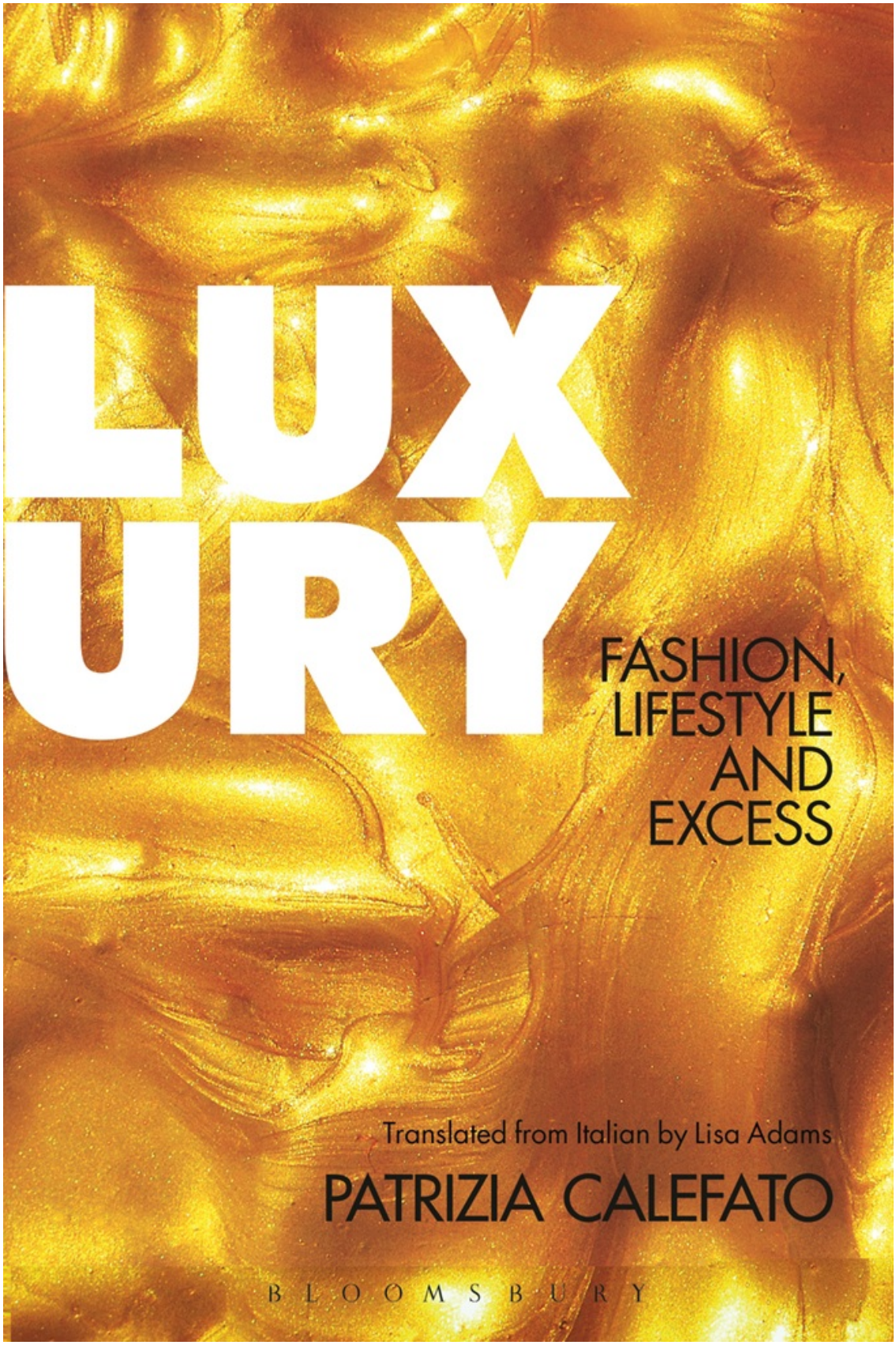
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Luxury

Luxury

Fashion, Lifestyle and Excess

Patrizia Calefato
Translated from Italian by Lisa Adams

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Introduction

“Là, tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté, / Luxe, calme, et volupté.”[1] With these words Charles Baudelaire[2] illuminates the constellation of images, suggestions, references, and meanings that hovers in modernity above the concept of luxury, a concept that is both concrete and immaterial. Only poetry can imbue words with a transfiguring power; only Baudelaire’s verses can carry the sense of luxury through time and deliver it to our epoch. Luxury is intrigue and deceit, domination and abstraction. Baudelaire is speaking to us here and now. He tells us of the calm before the excitement of a journey; he confesses the silence of the senses in which sensuality is the mysterious accomplice of luxury; he tells us that rarity is light and violence, a dreamt nearness and a limitless distance. Limitless limits, boundless bounds, distance that annihilates distance: the “journey” through immateriality becomes a journey through reality. The dream of luxury is the projected image accompanying our lives, hours, seconds. The unreal takes us home: the circle begins where it ends, and luxury now speaks a secret mother tongue:

My child, my sister,
Think of the rapture
Of living together there!
Of loving at will,
Of loving till death,
In the land that is like you!
The misty sunlight
Of those cloudy skies
Has for my spirit the charms, So mysterious,
Of your treacherous eyes, Shining brightly through their tears.
There all is order and beauty, Luxury, peace, and pleasure.

(Baudelaire [1857] 1954: 178–9)

You just need to beat out the rhythm and sing your breath; rarity is never

excess. An invitation to the voyage binds you to the one who invites you to go *là-bas*.[3] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999: 342) deconstructs Baudelaire's vague là-bas, interpreting it through its expansion in the title "Là-bas" of the opening section of Roland Barthes's *The Empire of Signs*, a book dedicated to Japan. For Barthes, this là-bas is the sign that lets him identify a certain number of features in order to form an imaginary system that he calls "Japan" (Barthes [1970] 1983: 3). Spivak speaks of Barthes's "innocent arrogance" with regard to an Orient constructed as the là-bas of difference and otherness, an Orient that Spivak views as lacking with regard to a historically constructed and produced Western subject (1999: 342–6).

Là-bas is a place without geography. Where is it? You can contemplate luxury as much as you like. You will be its accomplice; you can feel it in its utter calm. You will be without innocence; you can want it as pure desire. Luxury is the modernity of ecstasy. It reads your palm and doesn't condemn your desire. In contrast, moral and social sanctions condemn the experiencing of reality. Luxury, once a secular sign of the upper classes, is transformed into the technological reproducibility of the sublime. But the *fleurs du mal* (flowers of evil) inhabit a shadowy land, impenetrable, forbidden. Baudelaire's luxury—like Luis Buñuel's eye[4]—capsizes into its opposite. Sight is blindness, and luxury becomes its opposite: guilt. The flowers of evil become evil itself, not just its symbol.

Derek Walcott uses Baudelaire's verses as an epigraph to his poem "A Sea-Chantey": it has the same rhythm as Baudelaire's "Invitation au voyage," the same sonority. For Walcott, however, là-bas is living flesh, the Caribbean, the cardinal point of every world, every navigation, every contamination. There the future is always present, where it traces signs that are desperate maps in which dreamers seek cultural treasures. The routes are colonial ones, carrying charcoal, oranges, sponges, corals … and slaves. The fish scales are silvery, and the hulls are ebony; the mother tongue is the sailors' song, without race, since their language is the basis of all language. The Antilles are liquid, as are the sea's letters. We hear the "soft vowels of inlets" and the "alphabet of church bells." The voyage is transformed into a going, a mild, human, beloved going, in order to recognize each and every voice in this song:

Anguilla, Adina Antigua, Cannelles,
Andreuille, all the *l*'s, Voyelles, of the liquid Antilles, The names tremble like needles Of anchored frigates,
Yachts tranquil as lilies, In port of calm corals
The lithe, ebony hulls
Of strait-stitching schooners.

(Walcott 1986: 44)

One can imagine Baudelaire and Walcott as two flickering monitors on which the notion of luxury is spammed to thousands of e-mails. And one can imagine that their two gazes are the only ones possible between cultural perspective and aesthetic vision, the Western "here" (dominant but not hegemonic[5]) and the postcolonial dissolution of all conflict between "here" and "down there." They depict the frightened, melancholic, desperate, impotent, but also insatiable need for meaning. The key words in this search for meaning are fascination and hope, but we live in a world and a life that no longer seem to want them. Globalization in our age mutilates both the dominant and the dominated.

Luxury is waste, exceptional possession, distinction without a price. It is in this sense that I shall attempt to write about it, by looking at contemporary visions of luxury and mixing cultural studies, semiotics, and reflections on aesthetics. I have attempted to make the writing itself representative of the different angles of observation. Today luxury stages excess beyond that which merely has a purpose, that which we simply need. And it does so in a disturbing way: as a descent into hell, where luxury is the other side, in the shadows—the "accursed share," as Georges Bataille would say. Yet luxury is also the ineluctable ascent toward the spaces of desire, where magnificence and splendor are exalted. Luxury has always been closely linked to possession of the means of production, wealth, and social control. Its manifestations, however, have been diverse, according to the different social models in which its tangible expressions and images have been realized, and depending on whether it is public or private luxury.

In Georg Simmel's famous essay on fashion (first published in 1895), fashion is conceived as a social and psychological phenomenon that guarantees what Simmel himself in *The Philosophy of Money* calls the "objectification of the mind," something that provides the individual with a plan to prove that he or she belongs to a collectivity, in terms of lifestyle and social imagery, while keeping intact his or her inner freedom (see Simmel [1895] 1904: 147; [1900] 1978: 452). Can we think of luxury in similar terms? Today luxury, like so many other territories of the senses and the spirit, has become "discourse" (to paraphrase Simmel's concept, which he used with regard to fashion), replete with myths, "speech stolen and restored," in which myth becomes an "act of larceny," according to Barthes ([1957] 1972: 125).

I use the concept of discourse in the sense of a process for organizing knowledge, constructing the effects of truth and falsehood, and producing social roles and hierarchies (Foucault 1970). To this I add the semiotic notion of

discourse as any finite extension of words, unified in terms of content, emitted and organized for the purposes of communication, and rendered culturally specific by factors other than linguistic ones (Barthes [1970] 1998: 192).

Luxury constructs its narratives and preserves its aura. Its narratives cut through the usual associations of the word *luxury* with the ostentation of an expensive item or with discourses related to the concepts of ownership and consumption. Its narratives raise questions. Does it make any sense to deal with this slippery and troubling subject matter at a time when global poverty would suggest another kind of attention? What reassuring or, conversely, disquieting mechanisms does luxury introduce in the present day? What relation does luxury —as an irrational expenditure (of wealth, energy, lives)—entertain with the deeper motivations that hide behind the "official" reasons for war and terror? Why have reflections on luxury—together with its exaltation or condemnation—accompanied many crucial moments in history? What role does the new luxury have as the discourse of supranational domination, whose economic and cultural conditions are based on abysmal disparities in the enjoyment of goods? Why does luxury attract? Or repel? Why is it that sometimes only what is luxurious can be beautiful? And why is it that sometimes unattractive luxury has its own fascination?

These are questions in which the hint of an answer is latent, and to ask them, perhaps more than to answer them, I have chosen luxury as a transitional theme. It is not a matter of courage to study a theme that seems frivolous and amoral except in its poetic transfiguration. In this book I shall attempt to indicate the signs of how luxury is moving on to its next destinations; I follow the scenes and passions of a luxury that draws on the cultural crossroads, proliferation of narratives, and temporal and thematic references of our age.

Today luxury is an aesthetic, economic, and cultural model that seeks to repair the gaps in a Western rationality that lacks the words to explain and justify degrees of possession, forms of consumption, and features of taste. Thus luxury turns to spheres of exceptionality, uniqueness, rarity, and hypervisible opulence. It pursues concepts like *uniqueness*, *waste*, *eternity*, *leisure*, *travel*, *well-being*. The utter preciousness and obscurity of luxury tend to cancel out the signs and images that claim it as a mere "added value." Instead, luxury has to do with exorbitant value, to the point of being without value, immeasurable. A shocking terror emanates from the contrast between naked life and expenditure in an age of globalization as transnational social reproduction. Spivak describes the measureless measure of this type of value in present-day transnational capitalism: "Yet because 'value' or 'worth' (German *Wert*) (for Marx the 'simple contentless form' that allows any kind of measurement) is as slippery a

word as ‘supplement,’ it now measures the difference between the cheapness of their labor and the expenses of our enterprise: value-added—in a hyperreal electronic simulation of mercantile capitalism” (1999: 412–13). The use of the possessive pronouns *their* and *our* refers to the international division of globalized labor between Western multinational corporations and underpaid workers in every part of the world. Luxury is this immeasurability that drives life. It is a raising of the stakes. It is the theme of this book, and this book reflects both my participation in and my aversion to luxury.

–1–

Uniqueness

NEW LUXURY

The word *luxury* has never seemed more irrelevant than now, in a time of crisis, as our consciences view the theater and players of global poverty and wealth. Without doubt, while civilizations and cultures engage in new conflicts and while the need for solidarity with another possible world grows, we can only view with disdain a concept that condones the possession and ownership of things. Luxury is based on painful expropriations and makes even more explicit the global dislocations of production processes today, which result in new forms of impoverishment and enslavement. These production processes, on the one hand, and the serial standardization of objects and bodies-as-cash, where technological biopower is exercised, on the other, mean that an "irrelevant" concept like luxury is now associated more with the idea of a rupture in the midst of life than with the idea of ostentatious expenditure denoting social status. *Biopower*, in Michel Foucault's definition, includes all the strategies and techniques of the management and regulation of power over life and death that were devised in the second half of the eighteenth century and that have replaced the sovereign's power over life and death. Biopower is articulated in disciplines that control and legislate the individual's everyday gestures, attitudes, and behavior, as well as in forms of social control over biological aspects, sexuality, procreation, illness, and accidents; in short, over the whole living human body (see Foucault [1997] 2003: 239). The classical forms of biopower described by Foucault, together with the new global configurations of domination and the new technologies (including reproductive technologies), are today confirmed and empowered by the social order.

In his *Theory of the Leisure Class* Thorstein Veblen gives us the classic definition of "conspicuous consumption" as symbolically honorific behavior denoting wealth:

> Throughout the entire evolution of conspicuous expenditure, whether of goods or of services or

> human life, runs the obvious implication that in order to effectually mend the consumer's good fame it must be an expenditure of superfluities. In order to be reputable it must be wasteful. ([1899] 2007: 49)

Veblen also coined the expression "conspicuous waste," which carries an implicit sense of blame (51). With the notion of "leisure class" Veblen basically refers to the upper-middle class of his day, in which he also identifies traits, tastes, and lifestyles rooted in earlier periods. While display and conspicuous consumption remain an ignominious brand for those who exploit expensive commodities as a mark of prestige and power, the notion of luxury in the twenty-first century has to do instead with subtler categories and with emotions that are conscious of the play of signs in which luxury is placed. Luxury is not inclined to be trapped in the affectation of the newly rich; luxury goods are quite disconnected from labor.

In the name of reason, frugality, morality, or rhetoric, the enemies of luxury have condemned its excesses throughout history and across social boundaries, thereby attacking the essence of luxury itself, which arises from the idea of an expenditure that cannot be contained either in equal forms of exchange or as the response to a necessity. However, great turning points in history have always been accompanied by a perception of the importance (or indeed necessity) of luxury. In the modern age, eighteenth-century Europe witnessed a philosophical debate in France on the meaning of luxury in which intellectuals such as Denis Diderot, Charles-Louis de Montesquieu, and Etienne Bonnot de Condillac took part. There was even an entry on luxury in the *Encyclopédie*, attributed to Jean-François de Saint-Lambert. At the root of the philosophical debate on the reasons for the social necessity of luxury there is, as Carlo Borghero suggests, the metaphor in the "Fable of the Bees," recounted at the beginning of the eighteenth century by the Dutch physician and philosopher Bernard de Mandeville and later translated into French: "The fable tells of a rich and prosperous beehive in which the bees live in ease and luxury. The insects do everything that men do: they exercise the same professions, have the same institutions that regulate their lives and their actions are motivated by the same passions: greed, lust and pride" (Borghero 1974: xviii). At a certain point some of the insects appeal to Jove and ask him to end this state of affairs and to set up rules akin to sumptuary laws; once set up, however, these laws create a situation of complete deprivation in the beehive. The paradoxical moral of the fable is that luxury is necessary for the good of a nation; it is not waste, hedonism, or wantonness, but is profoundly tied to the very nature of humankind.

The breadth and peculiarity of this debate may be explained by the fact that,

perhaps for the first time in Western history, morality was no longer able to comprehend or stigmatize luxury. Luxury had become a social and symbolic phenomenon, which—in that moment and in that part of the world—explicitly involved the mechanisms of capitalist accumulation and which therefore needed to be legitimized and justified with the benefit of reason, in the passage from the old to the new dominant classes. This also happened during the crucial passage of capitalism to its ultimate phase of the mass production of commodities and signs, between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In this epoch, perhaps due to its peculiar sensibility, the rise of the social sciences focused attention on the deeper motives that had animated luxury since the advent of capitalist means of production, as the analyses of Max Weber (1904–5) and Werner Sombart ([1913] 1967) demonstrate, albeit from different perspectives. In a strictly economic sense, luxury is thought to have had a fundamental social and cultural function in favoring the modes of capitalist production ever since the phase of the original accumulation of wealth under capitalism. Sombart was cynically "cool" in showing the conspicuously wasteful spirit of capitalism, unlike Weber, who instead celebrated the Calvinistic rigor of such modes of production.[1] From another perspective, however, luxury—viewed anthropologically as expenditure, futile excess, and the realm of the nonfunctional—is not only specifically associated with capitalism but is an essential component of being human.

François Pouillon (1979: 584) writes that today the notion of luxury exists on the fringes of economic research and has been disappearing in contemporary thought. This theory is based on Weber's vision of the capitalist ethic as the ethic of bourgeois Calvinist thrift, as opposed to the ostentation and waste typical of the aristocracy. The Protestant ethic that Weber saw as the basis of capitalist accumulation does not contemplate squandering, waste, or enjoyment as an end in itself, which are all typical of luxury in its most canonical forms. Instead, it is oriented toward frugality, utility, and duration. However, Sombart rather than Weber turns out to be more long-sighted with his unusual yet illuminating theory of the necessity of luxury. He anticipated what would happen in the twentieth century, as products have become signs in an increasingly massified society, and as values like ostentation and distinction (closely related to luxury) have assumed a leading role in the irreversible epoch-making transitions we are experiencing today.

DISLOCATIONS

Luxury is a word that comes into play in language already charged with a historical value rooted in moralistic barriers and sumptuary laws. The *Grande dizionario italiano dell'uso* by Tullio De Mauro, based on the theoretical conviction that meaning is constructed by the social use of language, gives the following definitions of *luxury*:

> 1a. ostentation, display of wealth, esp. in clothing, furniture, or architectural grandeur … 1b. wealth, prosperity …; (pl.) facilities, services, furnishings that make a locality or a home a pleasant place to stay …; 1c. (fig.) profusion, superabundance … 2. anything that, in relation to utility, economic means, or habitual lifestyle, is considered superfluous or nonessential. (De Mauro 1999: 3:1059–60)[2]

If words are a repository of meanings in their history and usage, as well as in the transformations and contaminations to which they are subjected through interlinguistic and intercultural exchange, we may ask ourselves what we mean when we use the expression "to indulge in the luxury of something." In common usage this expression has to do with Charles Baudelaire's "voluptuousness," in the sense of a pleasure that goes beyond the everyday and invites us to embark on a real or metaphorical journey in which our routine is interrupted and the exceptional is a modus vivendi. The Baudelairian motifs of travel and distance as transfiguring experiences—giving things a luxurious patina but also a reassuring one, connected to the idea of possession and contemplation—are in part the same ones that today feed the new myths of luxury based on notions of taste, personal style, and refined culture. In other words, luxury is anything that can "dislocate" the serial and massified dimension of living.

Etymologically, the word for "dislocate" in Italian (*lussare*) should not really be associated with "luxury" (*lusso*). In Ferruccio Calonghi's *Dizionario latino-italiano, luxus-a-um*, in the sense of "dislocated" or "askew," comes from the Greek *luo* ("to undo, release"), whence *luxus-us* in the sense of "dislocation" or "sprain." In contrast, *luxus-us* in the sense of "luxury" comes from *luxuria-ae*, which indicates exuberance, excess, or superabundance in vegetation (Calonghi 1969: 1622).

Nevertheless, the free play between verbal signifiers (in this case *lussare*/*lusso*) often manages to tell us more than traditional etymology does, and it at least suggests that *lussare* can cover a range of meanings in which something "dislocates" the uniform discourse of a flat and massified technical reproducibility of living. It is here, in this bending of meanings, that Baudelairian voluptuousness and the measured exceptionality of contemporary luxury show their other side: they forget calm and order and upset the balance.

"Castaway!" is the title of the May 2003 issue of *Wallpaper** dedicated to

luxury, displaying a full-page photo of a young couple adrift on a raft in the Indian Ocean. The woman is lying on a fur rug and is wearing a gold-colored silk kimono and high-heeled sandals. The man is standing, barefoot, next to an improvised mast and is wearing a white shirt and trousers. In the background is a set of white leather luggage. This is the vessel of luxury on which the castaways of the twenty-first century set sail toward the best a trip can offer—clubs, shops, spas, safari lodges—that is, the best at the highest price or, rather, that which is priceless. It is not just money that grounds the exceptional value distinguishing the luxury castaway from the desperate immigrants on an overloaded boat or the passersby in a crowded nonplace. It's the idea of luxury as a measureless measure.

In this sense, the themes of contemporary luxury are still close to that form of distinction which Georg Simmel ([1895] 1904) discerned a century ago as something independent of wealth, morality, and beauty. These themes appeal to a way of enacting the relation between the individual and the risk of the exceptional, the challenge of profligacy and waste, and everything that escapes the bounds of utility and functionality. There are semiotic, aesthetic, and cultural strategies that produce the idea of luxuriousness itself; for example, the strategy of the amplification, hyperbole, and sumptuousness of forms, characteristic of the baroque, returns today in synergy with new technologies, sometimes verging on the kitsch, in architecture, fashion, interior design, and tourism. This strategy creates a new aura of uniqueness around the luxury object, in which the ownership or enjoyment of a luxury good becomes exceptional and dislocates (remember the Italian *lussare*!) the serial mass production of commodities and signs: a palm-shaped artificial island off the coast of Dubai, a space voyage for an eccentric billionaire, the Shanghai Centre by John Portman & Associates,[3] an over-the-top hotel in Las Vegas, or the setting for a film like Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. Castaway? Yes, but aboard the *Queen Mary II*, which until 2010 was the largest and most expensive ocean liner in the world.

Moreover, luxury gives access to some of its contemporary signs and objects by recourse to a device that recalls metonymy: a piece, a color, or a part evokes the whole. A garment made with gold-colored fabric evokes this precious metal, and if it is embroidered with Swarovski crystal beads it cites the obscure splendor of gems. From another perspective, luxury even lowers itself to the level of controlled consumption, albeit conspicuous consumption. This is the gamble taken by the corporate agglomerates of prestige brands that produce commodities for the wealthy classes but also for those who like to imagine themselves part of an elite because they can occasionally afford a small

accessory by a big designer.

The most famous of these is the multinational company LVMH, created in 1987. Its brands have a historical tradition of producing such elite goods as champagne, cigars, and haute couture and have recently added other luxury items: precious materials and jewelry. The acronym stands for Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy, names with an aura of luxury in consumption and its mythologies. Comprising fine French champagnes from Dom Perignon to Veuve Cliquot Ponsardin, cosmetics and fashion creations from Dior to Givenchy, and high-quality leather goods from Vuitton to Fendi, the LVMH universe dictates the laws of financial empires and opens global markets and flagship stores, from the Middle East to China and India. There, the new luxury is marketed in its most brazen, but also most symbolically efficacious, form.

The logic of a downward-looking luxury also includes the choice of some automobile brands to produce relatively accessible models. The aura of hypothetical luxuriousness for the many also accompanies the way in which luxury is rendered in discourse through journalism and new forms of communication. Many magazines once classified as "women's" or "fashion" magazines have come to focus on luxury consumption for both men and women, becoming glossier and more refined in terms of style and subject matter. At the same time, the number of magazines dealing with luxuries for the body and the home is growing. In 2000 *Vogue Italia* inaugurated the supplement *Unique*, dedicated to luxury and exclusiveness in contexts that include haute couture, architecture, travel, collecting, and other eccentricities of contemporary luxury. Myriad websites on luxury exist, with information, links, and suggestions for anyone wanting to buy an island, a yacht, or a pair of custom-made shoes.

The word *luxury* has taken on a supercharged meaning in the symbolic universe of consumer styles called branding. This is the angle taken by James B. Twitchell in *Living It Up: Our Love Affair with Luxury* (2002). Twitchell develops a neoliberal conception of luxury, especially in the sense of conspicuous consumption and the widespread practice of branding. With a very North American viewpoint, often tinged with irony, he proposes to classify luxury into the subcategories *technoluxe*, the way in which services or goods once considered luxuries progressively become necessities, from cell phones to microwaves and the Internet; *populuxe*, linked to the American model of the "rich and famous" in the 1950s and 1960s; and *opuluxe*, luxury in its present version as a social construction, through the luxurification of consumption in advertising, shopping, fashion, and the media (2002: 61–4).

Yet luxury is a concept that cannot resonate in all its complexity if left to its straightforward use in a "restricted" economy, to use Georges Bataille's

expression[4]—that is, in an economy that declares the obligations and constraints of things and words, while leaving aside the production of obscure,[5] dangerous, and abject meanings in the social production of goods and signs.

SIGNS

In an image in a fashion magazine, a young man is kneeling in front of a woman who is leaning against a wall. We can see only three-quarters of her body, from her breasts to her feet. The man gazes down at her pubes, while she lowers a pair of very masculine panties with her thumb. The object of the man's gaze and desire—like the voyeuristic reader's—is what is revealed under the gray panties: her pubic hair shaved in the form of a *G*. The photo was part of the Gucci advertising campaign for spring 2003. Its poetic makes explicit the passage of time: it is a sign of how the function and symbolic role of the brand (or logo) are being crucially transformed in the world of communication, images, and desires that regulates markets and tastes as well as the passions of consumption and the misgivings of morality. In this image, the logo—*G* for Gucci—is shifted in every sense: rather than appearing on the garment or accessory, according to the usual logic of designer labels, it is now traced on the female body in a bizarre and surreal manner. In this rhetoric of its presentation, the brand alludes to something obscure and unique in the meaning associated with the image, just as the secret contained in the woman's pubes is obscure and unique in every female stereotype. The image shows the zero degree of the body, the "G" point (*nomen est omen*: Gucci), a surface that is "branded" and so becomes a monogram of luxury, in one of the possible semantic values of this concept: the unique.

On the back cover of a weekly magazine is another publicity image, this time for Maserati. It is a semiotically weak advertisement, since it lacks rhetorical expedients and the unusual interweaving between the plane of expression and the plane of content,[6] at least at first glance. The photo at the top of the page depicts a blue car—it actually looks like a toy model—while in the center of the page the same car is more contextualized, on an idyllic country road. The name of the model, the Spyder, initially seems a clumsy misspelling. The misplacing of one letter instead makes it a proper noun; it stirs up memories, condenses a whole world,[7] evokes dreams that convey an idea of luxury. A car, a "common means of transport,"[8] is thus transformed by *and into* the elusive idea of luxury, which throughout its history has unleashed controversy and moral indignation, political correctness and recycled global ethics, and given rise to myriad definitions. If one looks more closely at the Maserati advertisement, at the

bottom of the page there are two smaller images, almost like photograms to be read in linear fashion. The first depicts the white interior of the coupé model. The second shows the Spyder with an open trunk; next to it is a pile of white leather suitcases, bags, and beauty cases ready to be loaded into the car. What is the destination? What is the brand of the luggage? It isn't recognizable, nor can the brand name be read, though one can imagine several possibilities. More interesting, however, is the journey it suggests, a trip in a Maserati, whether the coupé or Spyder. Glossy images of travel come to mind, scarves wrapped around the head of a postmodern Grace Kelly: the dream evoked by the scenery for a fashion shoot, the mental picture that prompts desire.

It is not by chance that this winding road through the language and imagery of luxury began with two advertisements that focus rhetorically and cognitively on names. Luxury is both myth and discourse. Its signs are visible and communicable and can be manipulated through visual images and words. In communicative space these signs lend themselves to reproduction and evaluation, and it is here that luxury constructs its reality and, at the same time, its intangibility.

In the period roughly from the end of the Renaissance to the French Revolution, a time when the bases for the production of knowledge and power in capitalist society were laid in Western history, luxury was a practice aimed at social control, even when it was denied, or banned by law. Luxury was a way for the aristocracy to access distinctive signs of authority, in spite of decreed limitations on luxury (and indeed often because of them). We may recall, in this context, the regulating function of baroque festivals with their use of ephemeral decoration, the divine value attributed to the absolute monarch's garments, or the function of extravagant garments and unbridled luxury at Versailles during the reign of Louis XIV. In the latter the nobility both defined and followed the restrictive cycles of fashions and thereby fulfilled their socially and symbolically "productive" function through this economically unproductive activity (with both individuals and state coffers incurring enormous debts).[9] In the modern history of luxury, the image that defines the canonical space of pre-revolutionary European aristocratic splendor is the royal court. One of the visual texts institutionally available to this stereotype was the portrait,[10] which both duplicated and constructed luxuriousness as an instrument of power and as a consecration of the body.

Today the possibilities for the representation and circulation of luxury in discourse—as for other key concepts in our age—are enormously and frighteningly widespread, though perhaps they are less solemn than at the time of Louis XIV and not directly linked to the celebration of power. Over a century

ago the quantity and quality of signs grew explosively as a result of their mass reproducibility, even though massification is the exact opposite of luxury. Today a further transition springs from the possibility the sign has to display itself and recount its operative mechanisms through the mass media. This occurs by means of discursive processes, such as advertisement and fashion, which, besides functioning as communicative devices, can also empower the sphere of the senses and the sensible world. For example, a luxurious house can be seen by everyone everywhere through images in magazines, on television, and on the Internet; in addition, the communication of this image engages our senses in all their complexity. Advertising discourse, with its special rhetoric of words and images, lends itself to creating an aura around scenes of luxury and generating new challenges and new splendors within its territory. This is not the prerogative of advertising alone, however, since it is accompanied, in diverse though syncretic modalities, by other social discourses, such as fashion, food, leisure time, and the body. In all of these, the exponential growth of the role of the senses is brought into play. Luxury, as that which goes beyond utilitarianism and is beyond any price, speaks to us precisely of the senses.

BRANDS

The emphasis on the exclusive and unique has characterized Western consumption since at least the 1980s. In its most common forms, this exclusiveness had to do with changes in lifestyle and diversifications in taste within the middle classes, more than with actual “luxury.” This process went hand in hand with increased access by an ever broader social spectrum to expensive (though not rare) consumer goods. Pierre Bourdieu ([1979] 1983) analyzes this phenomenon in his classic sociological study, in which social distinction is the fruit of a complex interweaving of elements that draw on both economic and cultural capital. The definition and segmentation of elites produce taste within these groups, which acts as a cohesive element between aesthetic and ethical choices, lifestyles, and forms of sensibility.

In Western society, exclusiveness was based on the power of the proper noun, the label, whose imagery and symbolic resonance were responsible for the success of the fashion system, especially in Italy, in the late twentieth century. In the case of the brand name, the proper noun, or its monogram, became the mediator and point of contact between the body and language. The name inscribed the word on the body via the garment, in forms that referred to practices and symbols recorded in collective and individual memories, from

tattoos to “written” ritual costumes.

Naming an object, and consequently naming the body through the object, which has been “christened” by a brand or label—as in the phrase “wearing Armani”—has meant that both bodies and objects have established their truth value and exclusiveness in words, or rather in that evocative word, resonant with the power to delegate: the proper noun. In a similar linguistic process, the proper noun—which makes objects recognizable even before we know their function, and so becomes their emblem—has sometimes become a common noun, as in the case of the Walkman, initially linked only to the brand name Sony but then transformed into the name for all brands of portable disc players. Names animate things, give life to inert inorganic matter, and hence function as one of the prime vehicles of fetish perversion, whether in the expression of the infant’s rite of passage, when she or he names a favorite soft toy, or in the adult consumer’s obsession with a particular brand. When a garment or a common utility object is christened, this perversion is placed in direct contact with the transformations the body undergoes every time we touch or manipulate things, every time we wear things, every time we love or hate them; in other words, every time we feel them as unique.

The name as brand, however, has become ever more explicitly a serial uniqueness; this oxymoron reveals how, if everything has been branded—christened by the logo or by the excessive naming that surrounds us today—we have also been deprived of the possibility of being nobody. The moral of the *G* shaved on the female pubes is that uniqueness and luxury can exist as the exceptional within seriality and as an interruption within infinite reproducibility. Urban legend recounts how some models shaved their pubic hair in the shape of their own initials after seeing the Gucci ad. Or perhaps they did it first, as a sign of feminine distinction, and Gucci was inspired by them. This aspect should be left to the secrets of the beauty spa, however, or the discretion of the bedroom. It is a secret that goes beyond imitation, which always verges on the kitsch.

Today there are two ways to become exceptional within the seriality of the name, the brand, and globalized production. The first is by dethroning the power of veridiction that the proper noun, as a brand, wields over objects and individuals. This is happening in practices of ironic and derisory manipulation of the logo—falsification, hacking, and culture jamming[11]—linked to the reinventions of social and symbolic antagonism by the antiglobalization movements. The second has to do more strictly with luxury and its representations. Less innocent, and certainly not militant, it nevertheless does not conflict with the former, with which it shares (albeit from the other side) an awareness of the need to be deeply embedded in the processes of social

organization. Both seek a “point” of luxury where an excess not controlled by economy is less predictable, even at the heart of economic laws. The obsoleteness of luxury thus becomes the uncomfortable topicality of its actual practice, the tormented ecstasy of its performance.

UNIQUE

The forms of sensibility around which the concept of luxury revolves today find in uniqueness a normative value and a key concept. The idea of uniqueness concerns objects, bodies, and environments. One example of the mass media representation and communication of luxury is the *Vogue Italia* supplement *Unique*, dedicated to luxury. “Feeling” uniqueness seems to be a mode of access to luxury, or at least a means of defining it and its contexts. Yet often, as in the Gucci ad, the idea of uniqueness is linked to the world of fashion, which is the realm of body seriality par excellence. In the sign system of fashion, identity has to do strictly with repetition and the corpse-like rigidity of the body, especially the female body, which so terrified Walter Benjamin.[12] Luxury persists through time, even challenging death. Fashion, in contrast, is the “sister” of death, as Giacomo Leopardi writes in the famous dialogue from his *Operette morali* ([1827] 1976). Fashion is the domain of the copy, while luxury is the domain of the exceptional. We associate luxury with objects and situations that are destined to persist, and in general *luxurious* is used to define something that remains and is not consumed in the transience of a fashion season. And yet spending on clothes, accessories, makeup, and other sensual delights has often been described as wasteful and luxurious. It’s hard to resolve this conundrum, so perhaps one should just leave it at that, as a conflict within contemporary lifestyles and values, while continuing to ask in what excessive and nonreproducible sensorial forms the “inconceivable uniqueness” characterizing luxury is realized today.

Unique and *exclusive* are words that seek to purify through language the mass standardization of consumption. The lesson taught by time, however, reveals the limits of language precisely in the sphere of consumption.[13] In its most human connotation, *luxury* answers the question: can there be desire without need, and can such desire be displayed without fear or shame? And the answer is yes: ostentation and spending are an integral part of the world of goods,[14] in which consumption, especially conspicuous consumption, has a communicative, symbolic, and ritual value. In this sphere luxury nevertheless alludes to that which is beyond consumption: it inhabits the limitless space beyond wear and tear and, in its chaotic unpredictability, reveals the hidden depths of the

economy.

What is unique? A painting is unique, and yet art in the second half of the twentieth century has shown that uniqueness is an illusion in the age of the mass reproducibility of images. Urban graffiti on a wall or a train can be unique too, yet this work of art not only belongs to everyone but is also highly perishable. We would never associate it with luxury, that dream of eternity. The luxury of art, in that it provides uniqueness to its owner, can consist in having a piece of art purchased from an art gallery as a sign of distinction in the context of cultural capital.[15] The work of art in this case is not valued as an investment, even though it undoubtedly is one: for it to be an icon of uniqueness, its economic value must not prevail. Rather the motivation for and sensation of uniqueness experienced through ownership concern notions of taste, and pleasure, both in enjoying the work of art and even more so in owning it.

To be unique, an object sometimes has to go through a process of manipulation, as in the famous legend that a dandy always makes his butler, chauffeur, or gardener wear his new clothes before he does. Indeed, there are many strategies for manipulating objects. Today words, in their prerogative and resonance in narration, have taken on the role of manipulating things, which become unique when forged by the power of language. Language thus plays the part of the dandy's servant, who wears his master's clothes in order to consume them, wrinkle them, and bring them to life: words invent, tell stories, and fill voids.

The uniqueness to which luxury refers has to do with time and manual ability in the process of making an object: decelerated time is the model for "meridian" time, in which waiting for things is a measure of oneself. (The notion of meridian time is loosely borrowed from Franco Cassano's "meridian thought" [1996], a concept referring to Mediterranean cultural values, among them, slowness.) Even the big brand names are now discovering the rhythms of craftsmanship. Since 2002, for example, in selected Gucci stores you can order shoes and handbags custom-made by skilled artisans. In this case authenticity and personalization aren't simply engines used by advertising to drive consumption but allow you to experience a distinction in which the brand name itself tends to disappear: in these unique and desirable objects the Gucci logo is applied discreetly inside the accessory, next to the initials of the owner, who thus becomes inscribed materially on the object, marking it with an incomparable difference.

Within the same logic of uniqueness, personalization, and the realization of the childhood dream of owning a living body contained in a symbol, such as a doll that imitates lifelike actions, you can even ask an exclusive shoemaker to

manufacture a set of shoes in seven different shades of blue, recalling the colors of the ocean.[16] Craftsmanship and the eccentricity of precious materials are harmoniously blended, for example, in a pair of handmade boots in ostrich and white crocodile by Dolce & Gabbana. Waiting is luxurious: six weeks for a Versace caftan in perforated leather, two months for a Vuitton patchwork handbag.

Uniqueness is a lived experience. Uniqueness is the narrative contained within an object, which comes to life and excites the desire to own it precisely because of its hidden life. In the sphere of luxuriousness, the aura surrounding what is now called vintage resides in this attention to the narrative of "lived" things. Vintage is what has already existed; it represents a bridge between one time and another. The more that things have belonged to other special human beings in the past, the more they are empowered to give identity and individuality to their new owner, who acquires, together with the object, a distance that evokes calm and pleasure, as well as the luxury of allowing oneself to embody another.

There is also the low-level vintage of bricolage, for those seeking a frugal lifestyle. This is what used to be called secondhand, though it has now been relocated and renamed in the syntax of fashion and interior design. And then there is luxury vintage, whose poetic is similar to the former, except that it is found in auction houses, collections, and high fashion, and imbues objects with the aura of a mythological universe in which their original history was located. A Hermes Kelly or Birkin (inspired by Grace Kelly and Jane Birkin, respectively) can be unique; a piece of furniture auctioned as part of the contents of a celebrity's or famous artist's house is unique; a piece of jewelry that once belonged to Jackie Kennedy is unique; a 1930s designer dress worn by a star on the red carpet is unique. *Vintage* has become a way of defining that which a word like *antique* cannot, since in our epoch time needs to be close to bodies and narratives. The "added value" (in economic terms) of a historical garment, jewel, or piece of furniture cannot derive merely from the ghosts of an epoch or style, in general; the item must be a *specific* object or garment that once belonged to someone, in which you can hear the swish of the bodies that once lived in or near it. It has to show off its realism through the luxury of its details: Barthes speaks precisely of the realistic effect that the classic Western narrative achieves through excess, luxury, and superfluous details ([1984] 1988: 151–9). The object contains the narrative of a renewed fetishism, absolute and sacred, at a time when the fetish commodity has completely deprived individual feeling of any prerogative.[17]

Something is unique because it is *that* thing and no other. Conspicuous consumption risks becoming kitsch if it doesn't indicate the provenance and

history of what it flaunts. The tendency of a style to be extreme and excessive can be called exclusive only if it tends not so much to exclude as to elect, elegantly, to choose (Latin: *eligere*) among many. *Eligere*, from which the word *elegance* derives, refers to choosing expertly and discreetly. Indeed, *elegant* is the adjective used in the exact sciences to indicate the expressive efficacy of an explanation or definition, which is not necessarily unique or true but merely, potently, elegant. Luxury as uniqueness alludes, in this sense, to the socially felt need to rediscover a theme of elegance in world narratives in order to refute presumed truths.

RARE

Feeling unique often means feeling omnipotent. There are many ways of feeling unique or aspiring to uniqueness. The teenager wants to feel unique on his or her journey of discovery, while at the same time feeling contempt for the adult world. This poetic of uniqueness was interpreted in the late twentieth century by street styles and youth subcultures from mods to punks (Hebdige 1979; Calefato 2004) in those *Bildung* (education) narratives that form the basis of taste and imagery. These movements find their ethical, aesthetic, and linguistic roots in nineteenth-century bohemian styles (Wilson 1998) and, even earlier, in the precursors of dandyism, the English libertines of the second half of the eighteenth century (McNeil 2000). Subcultural street styles have marked various generations with their excessiveness but have found a limit in the laws of consumerism, the very laws which had in some sense generated them but which have now transformed them into storehouses of trends for corporate hunters of "cool."

In this context, especially in the late 1980s and 1990s, sports sponsorship became fertile ground for marketing groups. The creation of brand imagery was often based on the added communicative value an item acquired when its brand was associated with a popular sport. Nike, for example, has been associated with basketball, Magic Johnson, Ronaldo, African Americans, rap, hip-hop, and street culture. Adbusters and the antiglobalization movements have often pointed out the hypocrisy and ideological falsifications of these corporate strategies in the social reproduction of logos, citing Nike as one of the main culprits.

Yet the concept of uniqueness and distinction conveyed by subcultures—whether consciously or not—has often traversed a "luxury of meaning," which is certainly not classifiable as ostentatious wealth, though it too is motivated by the idea of generating a shift in the symbolic economy of signs. Punk, for example,

practiced the displacement, decontextualization, and disordering of signs to the point of degrading and mortifying the body (Calefato 2004: 29–30). In the world of haute couture, the Italian designer Gianni Versace grasped this proximity, the subtle thread linking luxury and baseness, as can be seen in a creative gesture revealing the degree of his aesthetic awareness: his famous little black dress, worn by Liz Hurley on the opening night of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), explicitly quotes punk fashion with emblematic safety pins holding the dress together (transformed, however, by Versace into diamond-encrusted jewels). To paraphrase the lyrics of a song by the Italian singer Fabrizio De André,[18] the distance between diamonds and dung is not as great as you think.

An advertising campaign for Diesel in 2000 interpreted this proximity between luxury and baseness in a paradoxical and provocative manner, by highlighting the troubling presence of luxury in the context of globalization. In a series of photographs for billboards and magazines, the campaign depicted scenes of luxury with young Africans as the protagonists. In a deliberate semantic inversion, the message upset the relation between the "developed" and "developing" worlds regarding the possession of wealth. "What if the wealthy were there, where our dark side is?" the images seemed to ask. What if luxury were in Africa, a place currently stereotyped as a site of disease and death, a place whose symbology is far removed from the modernist heart of darkness in the Western world? Whatever the Diesel creative team was thinking when they conceived it, the shock effect was based on the fact that Western readers are well aware that in African cities, as in the rest of the postcolonial world, the wealthy live in the greatest luxury, while the majority live in conditions of utmost poverty, and in this awareness the images obtained an alienated basis of realism associated with a politically incorrect effect.

Luxury moves around the two conflicting poles of duration and waste. Diamonds are forever, as the cliché goes. But of what use is a diamond? Of what use is that particular diamond, which costs a fortune and is as seductive in the eternity of its cut and its luminosity as it is useless, silly, and wasteful to own? It is not a matter of cost, or, rather, the cost matters as in the expression "at any cost." Luxury intersects a desire definable only in the excessiveness of "at any cost." Nor is it a matter of social prestige. Today the elites of global finance often don't have time for luxury; they are too busy peering into their laptops in the VIP lounges of international airports. The prestige of owning expensive goods doesn't—fully or essentially—account for the formal relation between luxury and the senses, luxury and taste, luxury and the idea of time and duration, or even the idea of luxury challenging death.

Uniqueness and rarity are two concepts that might seem synonymous, yet they

present substantial differences, especially within the context of the notion of luxury to which both refer. A work of art or a jewel can be unique. A leather hide, a stone, a metal, or a book can be rare. Culture and nature, artifact and commodity, are intertwined in these two values, the unique and the rare. Something rare is not made to be manipulated, while something unique is, as in the metaphor of the dandy's jacket worn by his chauffeur and in other examples of semiotic manipulation to which a style is exposed. What is called unique is destined to remain so, or to be represented as such, for a long time, while what is called rare has often become so in virtue of its numerical decline or material wear and tear. The concept of rarity thus challenges nature and life itself.

A special kind of fabric called pashmina became very fashionable in the early twenty-first century. It is made of cashmere spun from the fleece of Changthangi goats that live in the Himalayas at an altitude of 11,000 to 16,000 feet. The softest and finest part of their coat is sheared, and their fleece is spun and woven by Nepalese women according to an antique tradition. Originally they were sheared once a year, whereas market forces today require them to be sheared three times a year. In fashion imagery, however, pashmina alludes to a very rare garment called *shahtoosh* (in English "ring shawl"), a legendary shawl so fine it could pass through a ring. This shawl was made from the fleece of the chiru, a Tibetan antelope; to obtain the fleece the animals had to be killed, and the fleece of three animals was required to make just one shawl. The shahtoosh was a symbol of power for the aristocratic dynasties of Asia and was part of the dowries of noble brides as a wrap for their newborn infants. During British colonial domination it is said that Queen Victoria ordered at least seven shawls a year to be sent to London, practically the entire production at that time. At the end of the 1980s, a finely embroidered shahtoosh weighing just over four ounces could fetch over $15,000 in Europe and North America. Later, thanks to a campaign to save the Tibetan antelope, by then on the verge of extinction (the Chinese government calculated that 20,000 animals were killed every year), international law banned the trade in these shawls. There is, however, a black market in shahtoosh at exorbitant prices (Schaller 2000, 2003).

The narrative contained in the shahtoosh touches on the disquieting contrast between a rare object and life. Rarity in this case results from a violence that expropriates the artifact from nature in ways we know all too well. What has happened to the Tibetan antelopes is basically the same thing that has happened to all animals with precious hides everywhere, whether the culprit is Queen Victoria or some other predator. Yet while minks, chinchillas, and foxes are now, unfortunately for them, bred in captivity for their coats, for the chirus that is not possible. Just as it isn't possible for all those wild animals hunted for their

coats—leopards, ermines, lynxes, and so on—that our stupidity has driven to the verge of extinction. On the posters of animal rights campaigns, top models, like Brigitte Bardot's ideological clones, have howled that it is better to go naked than wear a fur coat (whether they are truly angry or just being paid for their political correctness is hard to tell). Today the same divine beauties don't hesitate to embellish their bodies with fox-fur cloaks and crocodile-skin boots on the fashion runway. But what story can the mink tell on someone's skin?

It certainly isn't comfortable or pleasant to speak of rarity in this sense, since the idea that what is luxurious can also be rare leads us to think of rarity as a reason for undue appropriation, extermination, and war. For example, the wars fought over the scarcity of oil during the last decade of the twentieth and first decade of the twenty-first century are now remapping the world for neocolonialists. This is an age-old story: once it was gold, during the conquest of the Americas, that caused countless indigenous peoples and their cultures to be wiped out: indeed, for the colonialists it was *el siglo de oro* (the Spanish Golden Age, between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries).

The luxurious possession of something rare thus leads us to reflect on the future of life on this planet—and beyond, if, in a subtle and pejorative play between science fiction and pop art, having in your home the rocks collected by astronauts on the moon can be considered a luxury. However, unlike uniqueness, rarity is not synonymous with omnipotence, whether presumed or real. Instead, rarity brings us face to face with a profound sense of impotence pervading the idea of ownership of life and the world. Owning something rare, like a precious gem, an antique vase, or a priceless bottle of wine, makes us aware of a limit, one we encounter when we open that rare bottle of wine and drink it. No use, no exchange, no narrative is possible. Rarity is enough in itself, while at the same time it reveals the perverse game of abundance.

In some parts of the world, for millions of people, water is a rare commodity. Even more radically, life itself is rare; life itself is a luxury. Can there be a dialectic in this card game played with an open hand? Can Bataille's image of the new person to whom luxury belongs—the miserable, scornful human being lying on the ground—find a different way of being a citizen in the world today ([1967] 1988: 76–7)?

Figure 1 Jewels, animals, and food. © James Wojcik.

Figure 2 Vodka boots. © James Wojcik.

Figure 3 Ice cream Eiffel Tower. © James Wojcik.

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Wastefulness

DÉPENSE (EXPENDITURE)

The word *luxury* contains a divergence in meaning, if by *meaning* we refer to those layers of significance and value that custom, everyday experience, and perception deposit in a verbal sign. On the one hand, *luxury* evokes something eternal, something that challenges the idea of death itself, since it is what remains or persists. On the other, it is associated with images of senseless waste, a priceless price, and a desire that exceeds any real need. More radically still, for humans, life is based on the dialectic between need and desire, and desire is luxurious in that it exceeds simple necessity. It is human to acknowledge the allure of luxury. Even culture and thought could be deemed luxuries as opposed to needs: there is no "need" to think, no need to read, write, or know, though we can, if we like, indulge in these luxuries. For there is something more. As luxury teaches us, there is always something more.

Luxury is possession, but it is also desire, and so here, too, there are two conflicting, yet interconnected, kinds of logic at work: a logic of possession of the luxury item and a logic of luxurious desire. Possession implies stasis; it establishes the calm of a journey's end. The owner is at the center of a flux, between his or her jealous guarding of the thing owned and the envy felt by those who do not have it. Desire, in contrast, shifts, drives, goads, becomes feverish; it is an impassioned, imaginary journey toward the desired object, forever unattainable and sometimes even concealed. Luxury as eternity and monumentality is part of the logic of possession; luxury as wastefulness shifts and is decentered, like desire itself. Both kinds of logic exist in contemporary cultures, in which luxury is discourse, imagery, and behavior, and in which the idea of luxuriousness is linked both to things and to the systems regulating their production and exchange, both to the gaze directed toward luxury and the imagery generated by it. So what hidden social tensions does luxury, as wastefulness and the irrepressible movement of desire, imitate?

In Georges Bataille's work *The Notion of Expenditure* ([1933] 1985) the

notion of *dépense*—literally "expenditure"—is linked to senseless, futile waste. Bataille elaborates the idea of a *general economy* as a system that, unlike a restricted economy, does not concern the production, accumulation, and exchange of goods, but instead has to do with squandering, consumption, luxury, and waste as anthropologically determining moments. So dépense is expenditure with nothing in return, irrational waste, and futile, senseless loss, which all give rise to what he calls "sovereignty." The object of desire is forgotten; it never becomes substance. Instead, it glitters and dazzles, in an image that perhaps only gold and gems can convey metaphorically. Or it is amassed, like a collection, which is an end in itself, or else it is a gift, a donation.

In Indo-European languages, the etymology of *donation* has an interesting history that speaks of the complexity and conflictual nature of the idea of giving, or wasting by giving to others. As Emile Benveniste (1997) explains, the Homeric variant *dósis*, indicating the act of offering, passed into the Germanic languages as *gift*, which kept its meaning of "something given" in English but in German means "poison." Inspired by Marcel Mauss's famous essay "Essai sur le don" (1950), Bataille's classic analysis of luxury as dépense is one of the most profound reflections on these notions to have been produced in the twentieth century. Bataille thought that a society always produces an excess of energy, which remains as its dark side, or "accursed share," and that this excess is the prime mover of social exchange and the broader reproduction of human relations.

According to Bataille, "under present conditions, everything conspires to obscure the basic movement that tends to restore wealth to its function, to gift-giving, to squandering without reciprocation" ([1967] 1988: 38). On the one hand war with its destruction, on the other higher global living standards—increasingly linked to social injustice, not to the requirement of luxury as a basic anthropological trait of human beings—lead to the feeling of malediction associated with an alteration of the movement required by the consumption of wealth. For Bataille, the potlatch—a social and symbolic ritual of indigenous peoples in the Pacific Northwest region, based on the redistribution and reciprocity of wealth (in which two groups exchange gifts and food while constantly raising the stakes as to who gives more)—is the anthropological model for the notion of dépense.

Actually, this archaic form of exchange perhaps never existed, but was merely a projection by twentieth-century anthropologists onto so-called primitive societies in an attempt to understand them. But whether projection or social reality, the essence of the potlatch is based on the social obligation of giving, in which what is at stake is the "face" of the giver more than the content of the gift

itself (Mauss 1950). Here the notion of face is anthropologically linked to the ritual mask, the right to incarnate a spirit, to carry a blazon or totem. This image is implicitly present even in everyday linguistic metaphors such as “saving face” or “losing face,” suggesting an idea of the person in the etymological sense of the Latin word *persona*, which referred to the actor’s mask but also defined someone who had rights within a community. In this symbolic economy, the scene enacted is one of a challenge, and a festive occasion accompanies the giving. In the potlatch, giving means challenging the other to respond with a more valuable gift; otherwise, he or she loses face. The gift signals a moment of rupture in the everyday order: the exhibition of the luxury item is accompanied by a great celebration, and by excessive and festive destruction, as at a banquet where one is obliged to eat huge quantities of food. Gift and poison, therefore, converge: we perceive the violence and power struggle implicit in this form of exchange, the idea of a face that needs to be saved and so is ostentatiously adorned with gifts and decorations, not denuded in front of the other.

The necessity of luxury as dépense is in this sense far from the banal enslavement to the accumulation of goods, wealth, or means of production. If luxury evokes the obligation to save one’s face, this is because such a necessity contains something fundamentally human. Luxury thus brings into play an excess of meaning rather than an excess of signs: if there is an abundance of goods to be wasted, then what is important is not so much their quantity or their function as the fact itself of their destruction, waste, or sacrifice. Indeed, sacrifice and loss are an integral part of dépense, its “accursed share,” in which those abject forms of wastefulness to which Bataille refers are given expression: as in spending a fortune to buy a jewel or a work of art, human and animal sacrifice, gambling, and so on.

WAR

Luxury, in its intrinsic internal dualism, is closely linked to the “accursed” part of economics, in the words of Georges Bataille (1967), consisting of waste, war, sacrifice. Bataille included war in the nonproductive expenditures of a society, since in warfare the waste of energy and lives and the loss of meaning are as immense as they are unpredictable and senseless. Indeed, like the potlatch, war is an anthropological luxury in which humanity challenges itself, raising the stakes as far as possible, as long as there are lives to be lost. We are well acquainted with the reality behind this “accursed” imagery: the “gifts” exchanged are neither food nor luxury goods but the bodies of soldiers and

civilians, rendered useless (civilians are merely termed “collateral damage”) by the economy of destruction generated by this form of expenditure. The game of Russian roulette in the film *The Deer Hunter* (1978) is a stark metaphor for the tense futility of the challenge of war, depicting a kind of potlatch in which the contestants exchange a psychic energy that reinforces, in the drama of the individual characters, the sense of lives, bodies, and limbs wasted by war.[1]

Since the 1991 Gulf War, an adjective often collocated with the word *war* is *necessary*. *Necessity* and *constraint* are the terms used by warmongers who seek, in the sphere of language, justification for a choice that is unjustifiable and untenable in terms of conscience and indeed of life itself. There is a curious contradiction in the collocation *necessary war*: necessity belongs to an economy restricted to need, whereas war represents the greatest excess and expenditure of energy in human history.

Twentieth-century wars have been defined as “mass” wars due to the serial dimensions of their waste and expenditure in the age of technological reproduction. Walter Benjamin concluded his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* ([1955] 2008) with a far-sighted comment on the relation between war and the aestheticization of politics, which was an essential feature of fascism. He recognized, moreover, that the purpose of imperial wars and their aesthetic glorification (as expressed, for example, by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in reference to the colonial war in Ethiopia) was to allow the maximum mobilization of all available technological means, deviating their energy toward “unnatural” forms of utilization. Benjamin’s awareness was based on his experience of the First World War and the colonial wars during the fascist era, and in this context he explicitly warned his readers of the reality of the Nazi threat. Benjamin wrote:

> Instead of deploying power stations across the land, society deploys manpower in the form of armies. Instead of promoting air traffic, it promotes traffic in shells. And in gas warfare it has found a new means of abolishing the aura. ([1955] 2008: 42)

In 1949 Bataille expressed his dread at the impending mass destruction of a war between the United States and the Soviet Union. From the point of view of a general economy, he saw in the Marshall Plan the chance that, with world living standards raised, different methods of production could coexist, though this would have to be based on a “dynamic peace” (in the words of Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber) that held the threat of war at bay (Bataille [1967] 1988: 169–90). And indeed this is exactly what happened in the second half of the twentieth century with the advent of the Cold War (though this was certainly not a

dynamic peace, as Bataille, perhaps naively, had hoped) as a period in which arms expenditures for the two blocs followed the model of the potlatch, a challenge in which the stakes were continually raised.

Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* (1979) is a meditation on the dark, sacrificial side of war, and in the waste of energy it displays on the screen, it alludes to those tortuous places where the individual comes face to face with his or her own baseness. In the symbolic history of the twentieth century Vietnam was a crucial place and time in the founding of modern notions of loss and expenditure. The invincibility that the free world claimed to embody was lost. A cultural "center" was lost for no reason, emblematically and violently shifted to a metaphorical space we could hardly even name. Cultural postcolonialism was born in Vietnam too, as a liminal experience, over and above the symbolic and ideological opposition between bourgeois democracies and communism that the Vietnam War entailed.

Since Vietnam, wars have been disguised behind the ascetic precision of technologies: the spectacle of napalm has been replaced by the restricted economy of "intelligent" weapons. Since the end of the Cold War, the presumed necessity of war has centered around expenditure and technical know-how, in an age in which weapons technologies represent the "luxurious" voice of the world economy. A microchip can now trigger unspeakable destruction. A terrible, paradoxical luxury is linked to the possession of today's precision weapons, which use the most advanced technologies, are small and relatively simple to deploy, and are a source of enormous wealth and power for the global criminal elites. Today war explicitly mimics luxury in its exorbitant expenditure of energy, knowledge, and means of production that it uses solely for destruction. At the same time, it annihilates the conditions for survival, without offering any chance or possibility of return, as demonstrated by the experiences of the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. There is no "postwar" in these places.

During the second Gulf War, especially during the capture of Baghdad by Anglo-American troops, priceless artifacts in the Baghdad Museum were stolen or destroyed: jewelry, sculpture, bas-reliefs, and everyday objects dating from prehistory to the civilizations of the Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Arabs. Artifacts of inestimable value may have vanished forever because of war and the black market in luxury goods and collector's items. At the same time, General Tommy Franks, commander of the U.S. armed forces, was holding his press conferences in Qatar on a rostrum designed by Hollywood's George Allison. There, a veritable surfeit of symbols of U.S. power: five wide plasma screens; the military seal; an eagle on a shield of stars and stripes, with a map of the Middle East and the Arab world between its

wings; other liquid crystal screens and graphics; and maps of the entire globe. This new ephemeral apparatus cost US$200,000.

GRAND HOTEL AND GROUND ZERO

My uncle, an officer in the Bersaglieri, was infatuated with the “grandeur” of fascist Italy; even before completing his studies at the military academy, he left in 1941 for the “great adventure” of the African front. He was twenty-two, and he lost both legs near Tobruk. Back in Italy, he spent a long period in a hospital in Bologna, and experienced a long, dark silence, followed by a period of convalescence in 1943–4. He kept the photos from this period, which I saw many years later—in the 1970s—once he had decided to show me the signs of a past he preferred to ignore, the living scar of his personal history. The photos portray him in the most exclusive Italian resorts, where the Republic of Salò sent its heroes, while the war was still raging and his father and brother were starving in a German concentration camp. The scenes show the Grand Hotel in Stresa, the luxurious calm by the lake. During his convalescence my uncle got to know rare wines and haute cuisine; such refinement acted as a kind of compensation for the senses, and its effects marked his body and palate forever. As did the women: in every photo there is a different woman next to him, beautiful and elegant. He always remembered their names and titles, whether out of an excess of romanticism or male narcissism: aristocrats, nurses, young ladies with blue eyes. Luxury and war intertwine, in his personal history, with the pointlessness motivating both. If he had not been wounded, if there had been no war, he would never have known such luxury, would never have had those women, would never have tasted those wines. It wasn’t money that got him these things but deprivation: he had paid the price with his own mutilated body. Luxury comes from war and sacrifice (albeit involuntary); it is the unacknowledged link between them.

Think of the Vietnam veterans or U.S. soldiers back home after Desert Storm (1991), whose children were born with terrible deformities because of their fathers’ exposure to depleted uranium. Think of the names invented as slogans to make a preventive war seem domestic and familiar, as if it were a kick-box competition: *Shock and Awe*.

Since 1998 an estimated 5.4 million people have died in a war that has been raging in the Congo over diamonds and cell phones, literally.[2] This war stems from the economic interests of mining corporations that are seeking control of the diamond and gold mines and the sources of coltan. The latter is a highly

valuable mineral that until recently was considered worthless; now, however, it is being used in new technologies to optimize microchip function as well as battery life in cell phones, laptops, and PlayStations. It is also used in the production of jet engines, airbags, night vision goggles, and optical fibers.

In a famous photograph by Cecil Beaton published in *Vogue* in September 1941, a model is depicted among the ruins of a London street after a bombing. She wears a gray suit, and her face is hidden by an enormous hat as she turns to look at the ruins. We cannot see the expression on her face, but we can imagine her gazing at the spectacle as if it were the cruelly transformed image of a shop window. Beaton's special form of realism in that period has always been striking: his choice of scenes of destruction as a backdrop to his fashion photographs, at a time when the international magazine of luxury fashion was inventing the "sock shock" and sending provocative pinups to "our boys" on the Front. The sock shock happened in Britain in 1941 and in the United States in 1943. It resulted from the rationing of silk, rayon, and nylon, used to make military parachutes, which drastically reduced the availability of stockings. Women began wearing cotton socks, and *Vogue* launched the motto "Socks can also be beautiful" (Devlin [1979] 1980: 124). The cynical symbiosis between fashion and war is also striking (Bartlett 2003; Calefato 2004: 140–2): duffle coats, bomber jackets, trench coats, and earlier the very bourgeois tie, while today camouflage fabrics and military greens are also part of the fashion code. In contrast, models on the runway have peace symbols embroidered in sparkling sequins on their breasts. It seems like a reassuring exchange: fashion seeks to compensate the world by giving its name and luster to signs of destruction, whose sense is inverted, or else preserved, in the ephemeral game that replaces mortal combat. Peace as the symbolic continuation of war lives in fashion as a worldly and infinitely reproducible art form.

Yet luxury is more. It is a brutal challenge and a mockery, unsustainable wastefulness and extravagance: limousines and crystal palaces in Dubai. Luxury is calm and sensual delight at the heart of conflict: diamonds and oil, gold-plated AK-47s in the center of Baghdad. These are not merely *signs* of luxury but are luxury tout court. In an age in which all values have been duplicated in signs, in which things have been swallowed up in the generality of images and the immaterial potency of bytes, luxury seems instead to reveal, metaphorically and overbearingly, the durability of *things* themselves in their extreme realism. In this sense, while those who live in luxury continue to enjoy such physical objects, luxury reveals the other side of its calm and sensual delight. It is as if two games were being played at two different tables: on one, the pursuit of sensual harmony in and through luxury; on the other, the power and darkness of

wasted energy, as the origins of luxury, and the boundless violence of sacrifice, as its price.

If war is the conscious destruction of the supposed superabundance of energy and information in the world, then terrorism is the eruption, in this same world, of the naked essentiality of bodies, without any possible mediation. Just as a rare and precious gem is valuable in and of itself and is a luxurious *thing*—incomparable, inestimable, unclassifiable not because of what it signifies but because of its material nature—so the heroism sought by terrorism is naked and absolute, showing the banal ruthlessness of life. This heroism is necessarily victorious, even in death, or indeed because of it. And its motivations—both in terms of necessity (why are there heroes?) and of purpose (what is the point of being a hero?)—are symmetrical. Either one has nothing to lose, or one's reward will be in heaven.

Luxury as a recipe for overcoming the financial crisis of 2008, luxury in the opulent signs of fashion, is at the same time a quest for reassurance and for an order in things—the gleaming furniture, rare flowers, and deep mirrors in Baudelaire's poetry. Yet luxury also alludes to the symbolic economy of the very terror it obscurely seeks to exorcize. Is there not perhaps a common destiny in the projects of the architect Daniel Libeskind for the Jewish Museum in Berlin (the shrine of an unspeakable void) and the rebuilding of Ground Zero?

THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF LUXURY?

Among the experiences in my life that I would define as luxurious, I remember my surprise at the smoked salmon served for breakfast in a hotel on Gran Canaria, where I was attending a conference in the early 1990s. That fish at 8 o'clock in the morning at an international breakfast was slightly distasteful to me, yet it also seemed such an unmotivated excess that I just had to try it. There was not only salmon but champagne as well! It was only a four-star hotel, used mainly for business trips and conferences, and its furnishings were not even particularly luxurious. But the superfluous was one of the hotel's services; access to comfort was provided through a detail that would normally have seemed out of place (even though seafood at breakfast was not a novelty for me, coming from Bari) but in this case was a mark of distinction. I later learned that salmon is a breakfast food in Finland, too, where it certainly does not denote luxury. And salmon was probably also on the breakfast menu of all the tourists flocking en masse to the Canary Islands on charter flights.

Indeed, luxury goods and services, especially in the tourism sector, have

become available to a much broader social spectrum. James B. Twitchell considers the new luxury as "the ineluctable result of a market economy and a democratic political system" (2002: 25). In effect, we are witnessing the "democratization of luxury" (an expression that might seem contradictory or at any rate debatable). All-inclusive vacation packages in tourist resorts provide tables laden with food at every meal, inviting us to indulge in overeating, just like the Kwakiutl potlatch imagined by Mauss. Jacuzzis are now a commodity found in time-share hotels as well as in suburban bungalows. Haute cuisine, especially in Italy, has become the subject of TV shows with a high number of viewers on which heated discussions take place about the latest exploits of Gianfranco Vissani (a famous Italian chef). For retirees and large noisy families, a package cruise between the Caribbean and the Mediterranean on a towering ocean liner evokes a first-class passage on the *Titanic*.

These are kitsch surrogates of luxury, small signs of a desired yet insignificant object. Nevertheless, the luxuriousness of consumption has transformed the criteria for judging a "democratically" available service. Catering schools now teach only the highest standards of service. We now judge a restaurant by its wine list. A traditional bourgeois wedding reception must display signs of luxury, from the bridal gown (the most classic nuptial symbol) to the expensive rental car and elaborate flower arrangements. In some contexts, we have to use expedients to gain access to the luxury range of services: we can fly business class or get a premium credit card with our travel miles. What for? Well, we can be put at the top of the waiting list, for example, or be served better food on our trip and have a Lexus rental car waiting for us at the terminal.

So, for Twitchell, luxury is democracy, in the third-millennium version of the old liberal chant that money is democracy. Twitchell expresses this ultraliberal conviction when he considers—not without a hint of irony—luxury consumption and the globally recognizable signs of *opuluxe* as a "unifying force" (2002: 288). Luxury consumption for those of us who used to be excluded from the enjoyment of quality brands: is this really the dream-come-true of luxury for everyone, the postmodern adaptation of Lenin's slogan "Socialism is the Soviet power plus electrification"? I don't believe that such democratized wealth is luxury in the true sense of the word; rather, luxury is sheer indulgence for its own sake. The sky is the limit. Luxury disrupts democracy. Luxury isn't hiring a limousine for a tour of Manhattan. Instead, it is space travel for the eccentric, for those who can afford to pay millions of dollars to orbit the planet. Luxury does not unify, as in the idea that a bottle of Perrier on every table will bring global peace and harmony, or that owning a Prada bag means no one will discriminate against you or make you feel uncomfortable, even though you were born in a

ghetto (Twitchell 2002: 29, 275–6). Luxury divides. And herein lies its emotional power, the force of the passions it unleashes.

HIGH TECH

Dictionaries concur in associating luxury with excess, with what is unnecessary, flashy, and exorbitant with respect to the norm. In keeping with these definitions, one of the ways in which luxury is presented is through *amplification*, that is, the hyperbolic exaggeration of the forms and unmotivated preciousness of objects and environments, which thus become unwieldy, baroque, or even kitsch. An alienating emphasis pervades both the classic idea of luxury and contemporary visions of it; today this emphasis is made possible thanks to new technologies, which often establish the conditions for the new luxury: the access to exorbitant expenditure—from sumptuous skyscrapers to megayachts—and to the most sophisticated manifestations of wealth and prestige. *High tech*, in this sense, becomes an expression similar to *high fashion* or *haute cuisine*: it includes not only the cultural knowledge and practices presupposed and promoted by technology but an additional meaning that goes beyond need and function yet without which the contemporary technological machine would not work.

The contemporary idea of the machine is based on the image of information technology architecture: a multilevel structure incorporating knowledge and information that is based on digital processes and can program itself by passing from one mechanism to another, planning and regulating automated communication. This structure is founded on a principle of reproducibility and a potentially unlimited capacity for self-extension. This peculiar character of the machine, more specifically of the totally automated mechanism, is described by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi. In his theory on the similarity between material production and linguistic production, he compares the machine to language (1985: 72–9). Today the production of information—whether images, sounds, sensations, or data—through new technologies is “wasteful” and luxurious, if we take the virtual opulence—the excess of signs, images, and bytes—so characteristic of our age as luxury (Maldonado 1997: 90–1). Digitizing images, for example, allows us to go beyond the technical serial reproducibility made possible by the invention of photography and the moving image. This opulence, however, does not necessarily create a distinction. Instead, the copy, in the sense of virtual copiousness or superabundance, is just a copy, an identical reproduction; so it is the opposite of luxury as an exception or “sliding” within

the uniformity of serialized duplication. Thus technology can give rise to the original and the unique, to the luxurious in the sense of the exclusive and exceptional, only when it is extended and amplified in a wanton and ostentatious way, thereby coming into conflict with its own social utility.

In this context, however, the dividing line between the useful and the useless, between the sign and the durability of the object exhibited in contempt of its presumed functionality, is rather nebulous. If a luxurious object is a useless one, then what use is a cell phone, as everyone exclaimed until about twenty years ago? And with today's faster rhythms: what use is Wi-Fi, an ultrathin 42-inch plasma TV, a digital camera, a car computer, high-speed Internet, an iPod or a Blackberry, an iPad, and so on? What use are home automation (the digital integration of the body and its environment) and ubiquitous computers that can be worn in clothing or inserted under the skin as a microchip, as in the *Matrix* franchise? What use is nanotechnology or the performance of body functions and movements by the latest prostheses? (Fortunati, Katz, and Riccini 2002; Katz 2003).

In high tech the boundary between the superfluous and the necessary, the exceptional and the everyday, is extremely flimsy and easy to shift. A good example is the transformation in communication and behavior introduced by cell phones within little more than a decade, and the way in which they have gone from status symbols to everyday commodities. They have become postmodern fetishes, new means for reading and writing, hothouses of new jargons and fashions.

If technology really is luxury, in the full sense, then it must assume the most traditional forms denoting exclusive and privileged ownership, and it must use the most recognizable strategies for representing opulence: precious materials, uniqueness, and craftsmanship. To be a luxury item, a cell phone now has to be a Vertu in platinum with inlaid rubies, leather finishing on the sides, a titanium display, and gold headphones, costing around US$37,000. To be luxury, technology must avoid the flat uniformity of serial production and instead have its wares assembled by skilled artisans, as in the manufacture of a Rolls-Royce, the cut of a tailored suit or a precious gem. The Vertu must honor its name, evoking a love of beautiful things, a collector's refinement. Its services must include a real secretary who can book a table at an exclusive restaurant, tickets to a gala performance at the opera, or an appointment at the spa with one's personal trainer. The secretary must speak five languages: English, German, French, Cantonese, and Mandarin. Indeed, is it perhaps China, in this new century, that is the true home, whether real or imagined, of luxury?[3]

If the Vertu is Nokia's version of luxury, refined craftsmanship can also

embellish other brands of mobile phones, for example, with the handmade gold covers by Peter Aloisson, a technological jeweler in Graz, Austria. His most exclusive examples, in a limited edition, include the “Diamante” in eighteen-carat gold encrusted with over 800 hand-set diamonds.

OBSCURITY AND SPLENDOR

Jewels are infernal objects, writes Roland Barthes ([1961] 2006: 59). Gemstones come from the bowels of the earth, though their limpid brilliance, when combined with precious metals in those special artifacts we call jewels, are unknown to their dark origins. Diabolical and subterranean, the symbology of jewels is associated with luxury in the sense of futile expenditure and giving without return. Jewels are small signs of luxury, even for those who do not live in luxury: a broad range of social groups possess rings sealing a pact, family heirlooms, or jewelry inherited as part of a dowry. Moreover, *dowry*, from the Latin *dos*, *dot-*, has the same Indo-European roots as *dono* in Italian and *donation* in English, and thus refers to the function of giving in social and symbolic expenditure (Benveniste 1997: 34). In such contexts a jewel offers reassurance and continuity; it contains the narrative of a family history or an amorous passion. Yet in order to enter fully the universe of wastefulness and futility, the jewel must be “absolute” and must carry with it the obscure origins of the value that makes it shine. Its fate must be the reverse of the blue heart-shaped diamond lost forever at the bottom of the sea in the film *Titanic*. Instead, the gem must come to the surface, bringing with it all the abjectness of the depths, from the symbolic value of excremental matter that psychoanalysis attributes to diamonds and the act of giving them (Bataille [1933] 1985: 119) to the curse certain precious gems bring with them, like the Hope Diamond, legendary as the splendid and infernal bearer of misfortune.

If gold is historically associated with money, the fascination of gemstones transcends their monetary value, even though the law of exchange inevitably associates them with such value. While gold is pure exchange value, the gemstone is magnificent and disquieting even before it has a price. A jewel thus contains within itself an added value, which is affective and passionate and can be experienced simply by contemplating it.

“I don’t want to own anything until I find a place where me and things go together. I’m not sure where that is, but I know what it is like. It’s like Tiffany’s,” says Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, expressing in these words the elemental truth that the most exciting luxury of Tiffany’s can reveal to

a frightened “nameless” girl like herself. Tiffany’s is harmony, reassurance; it is the name that Holly wants to have. Unlike the promise of social mobility, Tiffany’s simply refers to the accord between herself and things, a life model in which being the owner of things means being in harmony with them. This is a very feminine image of possession, in which things don’t take possession of us, nor we of them. Gazing at a Tiffany’s window means dreaming of the life inside as if it were paradise, where even the gruffest sales assistant can gift wrap a ring found in a bag of potato chips in the famous blue box, the symbol of Tiffany’s since 1837. In the naive philosophy of luxury professed by Holly, the whole American consumer model of the baby boom era is called into doubt, even though this model would infiltrate Europe a few decades after Truman Capote’s novel (1958) and Blake Edwards’s film (1961).

Indeed, the early 1960s laid the foundations for the culture of shopping malls and so turned the territories of luxury into everyday places. In the same period, too, writes Roland Barthes, jewels began to be replaced by costume jewelry (Barthes [1961] 2006) in a process of secularization and democratization that gave costume jewelry access to high fashion, while the real jewels were kept in bank vaults. The exact opposite of harmony, this culture became the model for the whole capitalist world and, after 1989, for the former Soviet Union too. While until this period middle-class conspicuous consumption was traditionally associated with symbolic occasions of social recognition, such as weddings and funerals, fast and ostentatious consumption became a middle-class norm and a must for the new rich of the 1980s, who populated the stock exchanges, the nonplaces of the new economy, the wine bars and clubs of the yuppie generation.

To promote the release of the film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* in 1961, Audrey Hepburn was photographed wearing the famous Tiffany Yellow, one of the largest so-called fancy diamonds, discovered in South Africa in 1877–8; it is cut in ninety facets and weighs 128.54 carats. It is on display at Tiffany & Co. on Fifth Ave in New York City. This unique gem seems to glow from within, while its intense yellow hue contradicts the traditional lack of color in diamonds. On Hepburn’s slender neck, its infernal glow comes closer to the life of a girl-next-door like Holly Golightly, at least in the images that turned Tiffany’s and its diamonds into a legend. However, Holly was really Hepburn, and Hepburn was *the star*, a Hollywood diva, one of the obscure and brilliant species Edgar Morin has compared to gemstones themselves: “Microcosm of capitalism, the star is something like jewels, rare objects, spices, precious metals” ([1957] 2005: 140).

Today jewelers have once again focused on obscurity in their collections, exhibiting rare and antique pieces or taking inspiration from a revived exoticism.

The gem has made a big comeback, independent of fashion, and has created a subtle supremacy for the idea of absolute, irrepressible, and outrageous extravagance. Cartier's Le baiser du dragon collection distills the mystery of Chinese symbolism and ideograms in each piece. The collection is inspired by Oriental art and legend, with the mythological figure of the dragon as the theme of some of the pieces. Also, the *fen ling*, or wind chime, whose tinkle announces the monsoon season, is used to create asymmetrical pendants that seem to chime as the onyx, ruby, and diamond beads clink together and make their colors breathe. Here their obscure natural origin is the mystery that makes the jewels stimulate the senses in a mutual interference, a synesthesia in which the overspill and unpredictability of the senses are always foregrounded.

The idea of exoticism animating a collection is unusual, to say the least, in a world in which the word *exotic* has been emptied of its modernist connotation of strangeness. Rey Chow analyzes the role of imagination in the construction and perception of cultural artifacts in which Western representations of the "non-West" are expressed. According to Chow, once we have recognized that these representations often happen by means of stereotyping, it is important "to explore alternative ways of thinking about cross-cultural exchange … by continually problematizing the presumption of stable identities and also by continually asking what else there is to learn beyond destabilized identities themselves" (1998: 75). Chow then goes on to speak about film; however, the discourse is also valid for other cultural artifacts, such as fashion and cooking. In the current production and circulation of the signs of jewelry and fashion inspired by a banal Orientalism, there is a more complex meaning that goes beyond the criticism of ethnic and cultural stereotypes.

Today in our imagination the Orient looks very much like the West: indeed, its cities often contain more Western features than San Francisco or Sydney, for example, or the tortuous metropolis created for *Blade Runner* (supposedly based on Hong Kong). Its foods have the look of dishes from a Chinese takeout restaurant, its martial and spiritual arts the rhythms of a gym or a spa. The territory of luxury thus seems to offer an escape from the painless digestion the world is making of itself and its guilty, excruciating "differences." The dragon blows kisses from the window of Cartier's in Place Vendôme, while the monsoon whispers in the ears and on the décollétés of the owners of precious fen ling pendants, perhaps received as gifts. Obscurity is in the meaning the jewelry safeguards, in the mystery of the absolute otherness of the language imbuing it and the text composing its gems and precious metals. Only luxury manages not to make this distance seem banal.

DEADLY JEWELS

In the opening scenes of Brian De Palma's film *Femme Fatale* the top model Rie Rasmussen plays a sultry model who wears a bodice designed as a gold snake encrusted with diamonds entwined around her torso. Her role, which is secondary in the overall narrative, is instead central to the first twenty minutes of the film, which include a tantalizing lesbian scene with the main character, Laure, the femme fatale commissioned to seduce her in order to steal the rare piece. Rie is a living mannequin: the gold and diamonds do not belong to her; her body is a prop, a showcase for the precious jewelry at the Cannes Film Festival, that moving exhibition of "industrial slaves" (Klossowski [1970] 1989: 82). The jewelry is a completely abstract garment; it is pure decoration, superfluous as a covering, leaving the model's breasts and torso almost completely bare.

The decoration is twofold, however: it is on the model exhibiting the jewelry, and it is the model herself, exhibited by the director in the film narrative. De Palma proposes a kind of realistic citation of himself, appearing in the film at the opening night of an imaginary Cannes Film Festival with the woman on his arm and the precious object under his arm, showing them off as if both were luxury items. "Living money" (*monnaie vivante*) is the expression used by Pierre Klossowski to define figures like the star and the model, who are "industrial slaves" since their bodies are the equivalent of transactions, coins that can be cashed in for their face value ([1970] 1989: 82–3). Mario Perniola notes that the theme of the "indiscreet fascination of human merchandise" is imbued with profound motives linking economic value and symbolic value, and that Western civilizations are utterly schizophrenic about this (2000: 67–8).

The "living money" represented by the woman's body is made more valuable by the gold and diamonds she is wearing. Yet the female characters now challenge the more predictable narrative and symbolic economy: while the apparent function of the lesbian scene in the bathroom is to enable Laure to steal the jewelry, as well as to satisfy the voyeuristic appetite of the spectator, what happens instead is a breach of contract, which represents an element of surprise both for the audience and the characters who commissioned the theft. Laure doesn't actually steal the real snake bodice-jewel but only pretends to do so, leaving the genuine piece on Rie's breast after they make love, since the latter is not only a model but also a trafficker in stolen jewels.

The serpent symbolizes temptation and alludes to the female sublime,[4] incarnated by the femme fatale, or dark lady, that inhabits every woman's body. The topical pairing of woman and jewel evokes the dark side of femininity,

sublime and luxurious at the same time—the special nature of the female, who devours the male and his wealth, extorting money and blood so that her diamonds shine all the more brightly. The twentieth century was full of such mythologies, whether in literature, films, or gossip columns. The period gave these queens of darkness a very special jewel, regal and sublime, like the disquieting beauty of those who wore it; a jewel forgotten in recent times, yet of all jewels the most aristocratic: the tiara. More commonly known as the diadem, the tiara is a symbol of power, like the royal crown and the papal *triregnum* (triple tiara), which is also replete with sacred symbolism.

The heyday of the tiara was in the early decades of the twentieth century, when noblewomen wore it to coronations, at gala evenings at the opera, and for balls on luxury ocean liners. Chanel recently brought back this magnificent sign of feminine luxury, using the model created by Coco in 1932 for her Franges collection. An unusual diadem, it sits on the forehead right at the hairline and has a gold fringe encrusted with diamonds, like a Louise Brooks's haircut. Perhaps the potency and fascination of this piece stems from the transformation of the jewels' darkness/splendor in the natural vitality of the hair. Perhaps its appeal comes from the way in which the fringe blends the artificial object with the natural body, or from the softness of the tiara, breaking its rule of rigidity. Chanel confounds the aristocracy of the sign with the worldliness of the body.

Figure 4 Lemon oyster. © James Wojcik.

Figure 5 Water pressure/jewels. © James Wojcik.

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Eternity

BABE ALONE IN BABYLON

Babe alone in Babylon, drowned in the rivers of Pontiac, Cadillac, Bentley, Rolls-Royce, and Buick in the metallic LA night.[1] The myth is eternal. But luxury is even more eternal. The myth consumes. Luxury resists. The Schönbrunn and Hermitage carriages are luxury. They remain in those palaces, as precious as their gilding, like the whiff of the Empress Catherine's perfume mixed with the cheap cologne of tourists on a guided tour. After these came the chic metal carriages of our age, the ultimate luxury cars: James Bond's Aston Martin, the Queen's Rolls-Royce. These are the new eternity, where detail is decorum, and the handmade is art. With its Tuscan leather seats, handwoven silk carpets, Bulgari clock, DVD information and entertainment system, and Bose sound system, an aluminum and crystal Cadillac declares itself (in an advert) to be "opulence, craftsmanship and technological wizardry."

Technology touches the senses, conveying the idea of eternity, of the force that overcomes time, of fate entrusted to a luxury vehicle. Contrasts create fascination: leisure and speed, a collector's contemplation and the impulse to go beyond every limit, an object that is inhabitable and yet moves faster than all the rest. The prestige car reflects the passions of luxury as in a mirror: the sports car recalls luxurious excess; the Rolls-Royce shares its calm and ostentation. If the luxury car goes fast, it does so without a goal, without a destination. One indulges in the luxury of driving 125 miles per hour just to escape from the frenetic rhythms of everyday life. This is not the doomed desperation of a James Dean, nor is it a Formula One victory. Luxury is driving fast without having anywhere to go, even at the risk of dying. Where was Princess Grace, that icon of high society, going as she drove along the curves of the Côte d'Azur? Or Princess Diana?

Luxury is waiting for a prestige car to be delivered. The wait increases the pleasure of owning the car, as if expectation alone could sanction and signal the craftsmanship, care, and sensory perception that have gone into its creation. So

the car integrates, in a unique made-to-measure poetic, design, the most advanced technology, and a reassuring name. How long does the sultan of Brunei have to wait every year when he updates his vast automobile fleet? Perhaps luxury for him is the constant expectation of new models. In this gap between the moment of desire and the moment of possession dwells a luxury that has no price, and this nameless price is what fuels the passions that luxury is able to display in the contemporary age.

"Isn't space the ultimate luxury?" ran the tagline for the Renault Espace at the beginning of the twenty-first century. A few years earlier the slogan was used to launch this comfortable and compact multipurpose vehicle in a New Age climate, promising its owners time and space, the new values of luxury at an affordable price, though at the price of completely rethinking the frenetic lifestyle and confined spaces of the previous century. Time, space, and leisure are today valued as forms of the new luxury. Some years ago Hans Magnus Enzensberger wrote that luxury has replaced traditional values, based on the ostentation of wealth, with the above triad, together with attention, tranquility, and security ([1997] 1999: 163). Paradoxically, however, the managerial elites don't have time to enjoy these new luxuries, as time has ironically become the prerogative of the masses of the unemployed, elderly people, and refugees. They have lots of free time, but for them this can hardly be called a privilege (164–7). So while free time has become a measure not of wealth (contrary to Karl Marx's prediction) but of poverty (albeit still a luxury in the sense of time wasted), those who don't have free time or space (from CEOs to the new slaves of "immaterial" work, like call center workers) seek shortcuts in which time and space can slow down and expand.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm (1994) defined the twentieth century as a short century, perhaps because it was so hurried and cramped. The Renault publicity slogan is on the defensive: the luxury of the Espace-space has to safeguard its values against those of "real" luxury with its hard-hitting and aggressive publicity: "Grace, Space and Pace," as in the famous slogan of the Jaguar S-Type, a midlevel luxury vehicle. In 2010 luxury returned to the sphere of car advertising, with the Lancia Y and Vincent Cassel (the French actor who performs in the Renault ads) boldly stating, "Luxury is a right."

The Rolls-Royce Spirit of Ecstasy[2] in the modern version—maximum luxury, the English royal family, castles, gardens, and Ascot—still gives meaning and relevance to Sir Henry Royce's motto, "Strive for perfection in everything you do. Take the best that exists and make it better. When it does not exist, design it."[3] Space is a luxury, true, but only abundant space: you can walk into the cashmere-lined interior of a Rolls without even having to bend over. Excess

awakens the most pressing needs. Luxury is also in the details: a typically English quirk are the umbrellas in the backseat pockets. As a further mark of distinction, the Rolls is designed for an easy, intuitive drive, since its owners prefer driving it themselves to having a chauffeur.

The Ford Thunderbird entered production in 1955. It is a typical example of the all-American car. John F. Kennedy loved it and requested fifty vehicles for his inaugural procession. In 2002 Ford introduced a new model with the motto "in pursuit of the good life" and a retro-futuristic design by J Mays. Then in 2003 Ford produced 700 limited-edition 007 Thunderbirds to coincide with the release of *Die Another Day* some months before. The happy owners could drive the same car as the latest Bond girl, with white leather seats and the 007 logo on the hood. Luxury is also expressed through visionary mythologies and vodka-martini ironies.[4]

American dream cars of the 1950s were hyberbolic and excessive, like their counterparts, the voluptuous, full-breasted pinups with teased hair: Anita Ekberg in the Trevi Fountain, as voluminous as a Cadillac Eldorado or a Chevrolet Bel Air. Oversized opulence invades present-day dreams and is transformed. Go back, Babe, alone in your Babylon: this time it isn't Sunset Boulevard but the Malecon in Havana.[5]

LUXURY AND MOURNING

In Italian the words *lusso* (luxury) and *lutto* (mourning) are similar, and this similarity says much about their closeness in terms of meaning as well. A woman can dress in black as a sign of luxury—the classic refinement of the little black dress with a string of pearls—or of mourning, like women in southern Italy, who allow themselves the luxury of marking their bodies with an absence of color to evoke death. Funeral homes are called *pompe funebri* in Italian, and in Latin the word *pompa* could indicate a triumph, a procession, or a funeral. One of the earliest sumptuary laws in recorded history is the prohibition contained in the Twelve Roman Tables (circa 451 BC), which forbids solemn celebrations, lamentations, excessive libations, and burial with gold objects[6] during funerals. Such laws had little effect, however, in preventing the manifestation of mourning through ritual and social practices such as these, either in ancient Rome or elsewhere in other periods.

The expression "luxury fever" takes up the title of a book by the economist Robert Frank in which he analyzes the growth of luxury consumption in the United States in the last two decades of the twentieth century. From a post-

Veblenian perspective, Frank asks why this growth took place in this historical moment and lists among the reasons "the spectacular rise in top incomes" despite the slower rise in average incomes (1999: 33–6). The new rich in the United States became richer, and their numbers grew in every age category, but especially among the postwar baby boomers, who were just turning fifty in the 1990s. Many of them had "begun to savour additional spending power as their children finish[ed] college and [took] jobs of their own" (35). In short, it would seem that the Reagan-era yuppies were beginning to enjoy life again, in a phase of their existence in which they were also probably beginning to come to terms with their own mortality for the first time, through diseases typical of their generation (cancer, heart disease), symbolic passages (menopause), and perhaps the simultaneous loss of their roles as children and parents (their parents were getting old and dying, and their children were growing up).

For decades American funeral homes have prospered on the excessive expenditures of the middle classes on magnificent funerals and lavish burials. Luxury fever becomes total delirium when our eternal rest is at stake. This is similar to what happens for weddings, except that you pay for a funeral only once. And money is no object. Perhaps this is the only real case of "democratic luxury," though not in the sense that everyone is able to afford a rococo mausoleum. Instead, this is democratic luxury in the more subtle and castigating sense of "when it comes to death, the price doesn't matter." Does the image of a black carriage proceeding slowly along Via Caracciolo in Naples on a hot summer's afternoon represent luxury or mourning? Is the prince dead, or is his servant, who lent him the money to cover the costs?

In the film *Meet Joe Black* superabundant images and ambients of two versions of the new luxury—which may consist in the utmost in taste or the utmost in kitsch, without one excluding the other—are used as a backdrop to the story of a wealthy media tycoon, Bill Parrish (played by Anthony Hopkins), who has to come to terms with death. Set designer Dante Ferretti furnishes the millionaire's palatial home with elegance and refinement—interiors, furnishings, upholstery, contemporary art, and a park—and also with the kitsch ephemera for his sixty-fifth birthday celebration—a five-tier cake, elaborate gazebos in every corner of the garden, a thousand guests, *sons et lumières* (sounds and lights). At the end of the film, amid the fireworks, Parrish leaves the party with his friend Joe Black, who is really Death personified, Death on holiday,[7] who wants Bill to explain life—that is, luxury—to him before he carries him away to the hereafter. When they leave, amid champagne and swing rhythms, the sense of the party is overturned in a carnivalesque manner, becoming a kind of profane funeral.

Can dying surrounded by works of art and fine furnishings, or in a private

helicopter taking off from a Manhattan penthouse, make you immortal? Can extreme taste and distinction function as the perfect Extreme Unction and give you the reassuring dream of eternity? When Gianni Agnelli[8] died in January 2003, he was given a funeral worthy of a king, hinting at the deeper meaning of his role within Italian history—a more complex and contorted one, certainly, than the simple role of *padrone*. His death revealed the hidden symbolic connection between his dandy, playboy image and that age-old sense of easy self-assurance, that uneasy balance on which social elites are constructed. Indeed, Agnelli has been called a "king" of Italy,[9] even though his emblematic role has not yet become altogether clear, not even in the collective Italian consciousness. It has been said that he was a point of reference, a "style." Yet to a nation drooling over package vacations in a tourist resort, St. Moritz[10] sounds more like the name of a chocolate, though the real point of reference is royalty, duration, luxury—despite Agnelli's eccentric habit of wearing his wristwatch over his cuff, or perhaps because of this idiosyncrasy. Extra-large wealth, in order to become oversized luxury, must reveal a gap, a difference: it must be elite, not common; it must shout and shock, not calculate audience ratings; it must follow instincts, not opinion polls. Did Agnelli possess this kind of distinction? He certainly embodied its aspiration, and hence mirrored the Italian spirit of nonchalance and understatement, which is never dormant, perhaps because of an atavistic sense of that *sprezzatura* (studied careless or insouciance) described in Baldassar Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*:

> to practise in all things a certain nonchalance, which conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless. I am sure that grace springs especially from this, since everyone knows how difficult it is to accomplish some unusual feat perfectly, and so facility in such things excites the greatest wonder. ([1528] 1976: 67)

In an interesting article for the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, Adriano Sofri proposed a comparison between Agnelli, in relation to the new Italian political elite, and the subversive, dandified Prince of Salina in the novel *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*) by Tomasi di Lampedusa ([1958] 2007), in relation to the changes Sicily was undergoing in his day. The article begins:

> A French-speaking young man from provincial Piedmont conquered a Sicily that spoke Italian, English and French, and that Sicily, suitably outraged, took its noble revenge by seeking exile in its libraries and astronomical rooms. This history has a famous scene: the dialogue between the Prince of Salina and the awkward Sabaudian civil servant, Chevalley. Rather it's a monologue: even after defeat, the sovereignty over words remains. The Leopard has become abusively synonymous with Italian transformism, rather than with the nobility of a species on the verge of extinction: "We were the leopards, the lions; those who replace us will be the jackals and hyenas." Now it is Gianni

> Agnelli's death that overturns the geography of that scene. Thanks to the final decline of his industry, his is the role of the Leopard; while the new arrivals, those who until yesterday made up the anonymous masses on the production lines in Turin, are now on their way to Rome, creamed off and with visiting cards, to occupy ministerial posts, like Chevalley, yet without his dutiful deference. Both a victory and a defeat. Yet another snapshot of the famous history of Italy. (Sofri 2003)

When Chevalley proposes to the Prince of Salina that he become a member of the Senate in the new Kingdom of Italy, the prince refuses, since he won't accept change, though he says he would have accepted if it had just been a matter of being decorated with a sign of honor (Tomasi di Lampedusa [1958] 2007: 135). I don't know whether this comparison works: the Leopard in his day—with his palaces, frock coats, and fine manners, but especially with his "character"—embodied a luxury that blasted away the arrogant wealth of the *parvenus* with a single roar. In the ballroom, in a tailcoat, courting death. Tancredi to Fabrizio (the Leopard): 'Uncle you look wonderful tonight. The tails suit you to perfection. But what are you looking at? Are you courting Death?' (Tomasi di Lampedusa [1958] 2007: 184).

ROARING SILENCE

Compared to the Sicilian prince, the new luxury has more tortuous and obscure ties with eternity, and with death as the most expensive of luxuries. Its roar is not the majestic distance of the Leopard but the ostentation of a stratospheric elusiveness that at times knowingly touches on the kitsch. Emblematic of this is the Burj al Arab in Dubai: a seven-star hotel, 1,000 feet tall, whose smallest suite measures 1,800 square feet. The luxury of the furnishings, the display of contemporary art in every room, the profligate, ornate space, colorful and overlit, bring to mind sheiks and jewels but also the new global billionaires who give themselves up to eternity here. Perhaps the initials LVMH will save them. So let death come, and off they go, illuminated by sparkling chandeliers, in rivers of Grand Dame Veuve Cliquot (also an LVMH holding). Does such an aggressive eternity frighten the post-9/11 "mass elites"?

This is an eternity in which the future can seem shabby and baroque, like the interiors in *The Matrix*—a marble fireplace, an antique clock, leather armchairs, and dirty floors. Or it can seem full of gloomy technology, as in *Twelve Monkeys*, a film depicting a benighted luxury in which time is held at bay. Cinema, as a potent generator of social imagery, constructs futuristic science-fictional settings, often visualizing eternity and time through signs of luxury. The royal palace at Caserta (near Naples) was used as the setting for some of the

scenes in *Star Wars: Episode II—The Attack of the Clones*: sunny and courtly luxury, an aristocratic cliché that challenges and resists time, in whatever dimension the visionary big screen chooses to place its galactic creatures. The palatial building in which the replicant Rachael[11] appears for the first time in *Blade Runner* is a mixture of gothic and art deco, with high vaults, large windows, and towering columns. Or, again, luxury in *The Fifth Element* is found in the surreal admixture of technology and extreme fetishist stylization of the future: the costumes for the film were designed by Jean Paul Gaultier.

Is what we are looking for, instead, peace and quiet, and the values of space and ease? Rem Koolhaas has proposed these, using lavishness, contemplative space, and the consumer's attention as the value bearers of postconsumer luxury, in his design for the Prada flagship store in New York, which opened in 2001.[12] His "loop" design for the CCTV headquarters in Beijing, which opened in 2008,[13] is a rethinking of the skyscraper typology, a building that defines space rather than just occupying it. These buildings are monuments to the fragile eternity of our epoch; in them a bountiful harmony embraces us. Here we are looked after, pampered, as in an old leather armchair. Ease and stability have nothing to do with wealth, because they haven't been bought but have always been there. Smooth marble floors, opulent vases, fabrics with a geometric pattern, a rare Chinese marble sculpture of Bodhisattva, and a lion skin on the floor: this was one of the rooms in the Rockefeller townhouse on West 54th Street in Manhattan, an emblem of twentieth-century luxury—luxury made eternal by art, patronage, rarity, and detail. Such an extreme luxury silences the roar of the lion spread out on the floor, which now seems a bit kitsch, but in that context still manages to be calming and magnificent.

Indeed, aesthetically the new roaring luxury often verges on the kitsch; it practices it knowingly, following, in its signs and tastes, the semantic nuances and relations contained in the word *luxury*, like *luxuriant* and *lust*. In Italian *lussuria* (*luxuria-ae*) is the word from which *lusso* (luxury) derives; it means "exuberance, excess, superabundance" (in vegetation, whence the adjective *lussureggiante*; in English *luxuriant*). Thus the figurative meaning is "splendor, luxury, profusion, and sumptuousness" but also "softness, sensuality, abandon, intemperance, and lasciviousness." In Latin *luxurio-as-aviatum-are* and *luxurior-atus-sum-ari* mean "to luxuriate, to be exuberant (of vegetation)," and so the figurative meaning is "to be lascivious, to be full of exuberance and vitality; to be luxuriant, abundant (e.g., in one's limbs); to give oneself up to sensuality and excess." So *luxus-us* means "excess, luxury, dissipation, a sensuous and lustful life, opulence, profusion, indulgence, splendor, magnificence, luxury (with a positive connotation)," as in Tacitus's *eruditus*

luxus, which indicates a refined taste in spending (Calonghi 1969: 1622). It is interesting to note that the Italian *lussuria* is translated in English as *lust*, while in German *Lust* means both "desire" and "pleasure." *Lust*, in its overall meaning, is a key concept in Sigmund Freud's theory of sexuality (see Freud [1921] 2010). In this overlapping of words and meanings across languages, we also encounter the meaning of Georges Bataille's *dépense* in a context of eroticism (Bataille [1933] 1985: 128). The image of eroticism proposed by Bataille is modeled on male sexual experience, nor could it be otherwise. His vision of Eros as disorder ([1957] 1986: 170; [1961] 1989) introduces the disconcerting abyss and anguish in which Eros places humans, at the very moment in which the confirmation of phallic rhythm and imagery would seem to be at its height. It is an abyss of meanings that has to do with the notion of luxury as a never-ending movement.

Language reveals the deeper meaning of words: luxury is like something luxuriant that displays itself in excess; profuse vegetation or a blooming garden evokes the image of an irrepressible Nature that sends forth copious, spiraling flowers and branches.[14] Lust is like the Latin *luxuria*, a word suggesting that wealth is synonymous with loose morals and sexual intemperance. Cosmetics, fine clothing, rich foods, gold, erotic dissoluteness, spicy perfumes, heavy brocades: the mind is crowded with symbols and images that evoke splendor and profusion. An almost nauseous sensation accompanies these kinds of excess. Contemporary images include poodles shaved and bedecked in powdered wigs like eighteenth-century dames, with platinum and diamond collars; Barbara Cartland in a pink Barbie dress with a Pekingese under her arm; sofas upholstered in zebra and leopard skin; gilt velvet neobaroque armchairs; crocodile-skin bags and shoes.

In the film *Eyes Wide Shut* Stanley Kubrick uses a mansion of the New York aristocracy as the setting for a sinister orgy in which everyone is masked. The scene performs the sublime haute couture of perversion in a sadomasochistic dress code. A thin line separates pleasure and disgust, fetishist refinement and bad taste.

HAUTE COUTURE

A photo by Norman Parkinson in *Vogue Italia* in 1968 shows Benedetta Barzini:[15] Benedetta-Pierrot, you've never looked so pale and thin. You're sitting on the ground, with big eyes and false eyelashes, with a white blouse ruched around your neck and wrists, a sequined waistcoat and trousers, and your hair

pulled up in a crest. Behind you a classical sculpture can be half-glimpsed: a whiff of Italy, a museum. Your right hand is open, like a child begging; in it you hold some coins. Italian beauty, tell us about yourself. Bert Stern, Irving Penn, and all those fascinated by your allure sought you out. You were waiting, spending your nights amid flashlamps, wearing false eyelashes that pulled your eyelids, false nails that hid your own that you used to bite, foundation to cover your thick eyebrows. Limousines in New York came to pick you up, and you said, "No thanks." You had already known luxury: the wealth and good taste of your noble lineage, villas, formal gardens, interiors with a wonderful feeling of solidity. You ran away from home, like the Pierrot child in the photo, and you became the haute couture of a "passion without a body,"[16] beginning one of your many lives, in which luxury and good taste sketched new tales on the pages of your flesh.

In the 1960s the success of high fashion was measured against the trends of the moment: you were a tramp, a panther, a bird woman, a metallic woman, an Italian body, at a time when Italy was increasing its consumer markets and changing its image: no longer *La dolce vita*, no longer *Roman Holiday*, but Pier Paolo Pasolini, just before fashion became *Made in Italy*. Speed was an accomplice of luxury, and clothing sped along with the moment; soon Italian fashion would become prêt-à-porter. In Paris, what Roland Barthes (1967) called the Chanel-Courrèges match was taking place: the chic versus the new, style versus fashion. And the winner was fashion—the fleeting moment, awaiting the new (Heidegger 1977: 107); the future just around the corner, which fashion envisioned as plastic or metallic, with a nod to the 1968 student revolution. The sublimated time of Chanel chic persisted nonetheless, safeguarding the eternity of its retro beauties haughtily cloistered in the 8th *arrondisséme*nt.

In 2003, you are back in a revived, magnificent Paris, and you slip back into the garments of who you used to be, still trying "to tell the story of [these] garments, just as a narrator tells his/her audience a story" (Barzini 2003: 176). And the clothes of today want to tell the same story as yesterday: how to consign the body and beauty to eternity. Only today, eternity is hieratic; it freezes your body and muffles it in a silk cloak and long Dior gown by John Galliano, in which your picture is taken. You look as if you were in a plaster cast from head to toe. Eternity needs weighty words. You write, "The magnificence of luxury has always brought with it an element of discomfort" (Barzini 2003: 174). Haute couture today pays homage to the weightiness of the sign in its excessive refinement.

For Karl Lagerfeld, creative director of Chanel, "lace is a mysterious, soft, elegant material. It influences creation; it has always existed."[17] Lace has

“always existed,” that precious artifact with its superfine detail, colors, and designs; it gets donated to museums and demonstrates the craftsmanship of tailors and fashion houses. You, Benedetta, tell us about the slowness, the long waits, and the completion; in Lagerfeld’s words: “to make an haute couture garment takes a long time and this too gives it an imperceptible but concrete value.”[18] In the winter of 1998–9 Issey Miyake set up an exhibition called *Making Things* at the Cartier Foundation—the maximum idea of luxury evoked by a name—in which he demonstrated the production process of a haute couture garment, as a product that is never really finished (Miyake 1998). In “making things” the couturier is in conflict with the market economy, which is interested only in the readily available product, to be packaged and sold as soon as possible with a famous label.

Miyake’s work shows that the haute couture garment is made to be seen as a work of art. The faster the pace of everyday life, the slower and more inconclusive the production and circulation of the garment. This is not consumption but luxury. It’s not the fashion of the televised and talked-about runways. It’s the atelier, the artistic photo, the couturier who sews and embroiders the eternal Penelopean fabrics, like the eternity she or he seeks to hold back and the eternal gestures she or he doesn’t want forgotten. This is a world theater where time exists only as pause.

“You design time,” says Yohji Yamamoto in the film *Aufzeichnungen zu Kleidern und Städten* (*Notebooks on Cities and Clothes*),[19] when speaking to Wim Wenders about his highly specialized art as a couturier/fashion designer, in which, with a pincushion on his wrist, he sets to work with his assistants, with hands, scissors, and eyes. It is as if all these “creators” were adepts in a monastery. There is poetry in that little Japanese tailor, who seeks to impart to a coat collar the sense of having always belonged to the person wearing it, and who learned this lesson from a Cartier-Bresson portrait of Jean-Paul Sartre in an old overcoat. High fashion is the art of the body that consigns itself to time like a precious, indestructible marble; it is fashion that never goes out of fashion. It is the opposite of consumption, even high-level consumption, and of branding as an expedient for easy sales and for classifying products in terms of lifestyles and the Diderot effect.[20]

This, too, is a way for contemporary luxury to reveal unexpected sensations: the conflict and tension between luxury and frugality, in mutual opposition, are confirmed as the ever more frequent ways in which our epoch experiences those passions of which objects are the mediators. Wealth and misery are the two poles of this conflict: the rain of gold dust evokes by contrast the global famines, just as the court festivity is overturned in the tramps’ carnival and in the semantic

inversion implied in every celebration. Paris stands for both haute couture and *banlieues* (suburbs). Luxury reveals its hidden chasms and the extreme contrasts that keep it alive; dancing until the very last waltz, uncorking bottles of champagne as the *Titanic* sinks.

"I saw masterpieces dissociated from concreteness, from the logic of modern living" (Barzini 2003: 174). Tell us, Benedetta, about the luxurious Parisian fashion shows that you relished like a royal ball, knowing full well that unwearableness is the law of eternity. You featherlight grandmother in golden arabesques, that same law forced your body to pose like an automaton in the cage of glossy fashion magazines, and it now gives you the reassurance of a body that doesn't exist within its own physical boundaries but only within a ponderous abstraction.

THE BODY

Luxury turns the body's boundaries into a mere abstraction. Luxury is the exorbitant and extraordinary body. High fashion, deluxe makeup, well-being, ease, and space are the poetics of the body that can indulge in the luxury of disregarding its limits. They defy death; indeed, they mock it. They signify eternity achieved despite the limits known by the body. Our body is our greatest otherness; just a slip, a faint, or a fluttering heart are enough to make it fail us, enough to diminish or even nullify our experience of the body as our object—as our territory, where our certainties regarding time are played out. The body is unpredictable. Hence the possibility of well-being in and with one's body is perceived as one of the greatest contemporary luxuries.

Is luxury an aesthetic ideal? Not in the current sense of body stereotypes, that type of beauty by the book, recognized as perfect only in relation to set standards, which are the ideals of the body as commodity, the body as merchandise, or else the body as an object of inquiry or the seat of experimentation in life technologies. Luxury is not an aesthetic ideal of the body, if by body aesthetics we mean the new anthropometrics, the measurements and limits of the body itself: CAT scans, blood tests, eugenics tables, percentiles, sizes, diets, the visible human project.[21] Luxury consists in being able to indulge in the luxury of not giving a damn.[22] Luxury makes the body opaque, heavy, and prevents its transformation into something transparent and completely visible in its most secret inner recesses.

Is luxury an ethical ideal? Well-being as body luxury is the true dimension of the body's humanity; based on its essential principle we should live

immoderately, not just survive. Here luxury reveals, in a conflictual way, its opposite: the often impossible survival, where the affluent society turns out to be the sick society in which no one lives well. The emblem of body luxury is David Lachapelle's photography, a style that magnifies the body, making it extreme, over the top, and unreal, both tacky and glamorous at the same time. His images are like perennial plastic surgery, impossible and unattainable, somewhere between Michael Jackson's mutant kitsch and the diamonds on a statuesque Miss World.

The exhibition of luxurious female bodies for the Miss World finals in Nigeria in November 2002 resulted in interreligious riots that left over 200 dead. A tragedy of terror and death was unleashed on this occasion in which the contestants expressed the globalized magnificence of a body industry that knows how to multiply its aesthetic canons: every color, every nuance, and every culture, the more "exotic" the better. The event seeks the maximum in beauty and symbols of luxury, from jewelry to deluxe makeup, and industries specializing in these sponsored the pageant. And that very "maximum," that absolute beauty, was the starting point for the Manichean logic of terror: on one side civilization, on the other barbarism. Yet civilization and barbarism, right and wrong, are interchangeable: a nude Miss can easily pass from one to the other; she can be a preeminent symbol either of democracy, which allows women to take off their clothes, or of all the most perverse and appalling evils in the West, including that of turning the splendid body of a Miss into a precious coin.

The female body is the luxurious body par excellence. Perhaps because of the amplification of signs presupposed by luxury, the female body, potentially open ad infinitum to the reproduction of other bodies, is in itself a symbol of luxury in nature, where life is luxuriant simply because it is life. The boundary between luxury and lust is shifting in this case, too. The stereotypical misogynist images rooted in culture moralistically associate human perdition with the Eves and Helens of a bellicose patriarchal history. These images contain the idea of owning the female body, over which both real and symbolic power struggles have been unleashed in every age. In any case, the association of the female body with luxury goes beyond the idea of the body as merchandise that is encapsulated in, for example, the figures of stars and supermodels. It seeps out, albeit in distorted form, from the pages of glossy magazines, from the superyachts and plush harems, both Eastern and Western,[23] in which female bodies shine like (or with) jewels and seal the image of power and the concept of ownership with the authority held by every precious thing.

Is the association between women and cars an old story or a new one? In

Werner Sombart's social and economic history, as set out in *Luxury and Capitalism* ([1913] 1967), a close kinship between luxury and women (both as key social figures in everyday life and as courtesans) is discerned. In Sombart's analysis, the function of luxury in capitalism passes through the complexity of lifestyle transformations both of the aristocracy and the middle class over two centuries (the seventeenth and eighteenth). Within this complexity, Sombart ascribes an important role to transformations in the relations between the sexes, especially to the role of women in consumption: from fabrics to furnishings, from garments to gourmet cuisine. Moreover, upper-middle-class women were the first to indulge in luxury consumption, thereby affecting in a decisive way the cycles of social reproduction.

Indeed, in the historiography of capitalism written by men, there is an emphasis on the presumed feminine propensity for "unproductive expenditure," quantified economically as expenditures for clothing, movable goods, flowers, jewelry, elaborate cooking, and ornamentation. In this sense the female body incarnates the opposite of Calvinistic thrift, and bourgeois women have been defined aesthetically—corsets and crinolines—as the window onto luxury for their men in black, showing the gendered connotations of bourgeois capitalism. But what are the deeper motives linking luxury and the female body today, as an intricate whole of social discourses and passions, flesh and memory? Why is luxury associated with the feminine to the point that when a man performs as a drag queen, the most veridictive[24] marks of femininity are the sequins, plumes, and jewels, the affected and exaggerated gestures, and the overdone makeup—such a luxury of signs that they explode into stereotypes? Why do elegance, dandyism, and aesthetic distinction, even when practiced by a man, have a whiff of slightly dissolute effeminacy?

It is the eternity of the human body that is at stake, whether female or male. The conflict is implicit in its being *my* body while not belonging to me. My body shows me my own limits, but its own limitlessness, and herein lies the luxurious boundlessness of my womanly body within the very cultural history that marks it and places it in the present. It is a body that loses blood once a month, then loses even that loss in menopause. It loses liquids, tears, and words (gossip, chatter). It loses weight and solidity in disease and death, thereby imitating—at the opposite pole—the most extreme luxury, which expresses, according to Bataille, the principles of loss and dissipation.[25] The body—that is, us, in that we lose ourselves—is consigned to eternity.

Figure 6 Understatement. © James Wojcik.

Figure 7 Fancy. © James Wojcik.

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Leisure and Travel

EXTREMES

Leisure and travel, home and abroad, inertia and movement: one can choose the luxury of doing nothing or the luxury of traveling around the world. Leisure is luxurious because it isn't mere inactivity,[1] idleness as opposed to action, or a restful vacation after a long period of work in order to work more efficiently afterwards. Indeed, leisure is the opposite of being stuck in a social function or role. Travel evokes the very human luxury of overcoming a situation of stasis and identical reproduction by moving through space. In *The Songlines* Bruce Chatwin writes that the word for human being in Tibetan—*a-Gro-ba*—literally means "one who goes on migrations" (1987: 69). Chatwin imagines the condition of travelers and migrants as an innate characteristic of human beings. Based on this notion, movement, travel, and migrating are all part of the need to escape confined spaces, a need that can also be a luxury, one in which the distance traveled measures the quality of life itself.

In the sphere of luxury, leisure and travel both allude to wasting time. If you don't have anything to do, then you can do everything, in the sense of using your imagination and energy for purposes other than productivity or work in exchange for money, work as a *negotiation* of time. Emile Benveniste notes that the Latin word *negotium* (work, business) is derived from a negative expression, *nec-ōtium* (non-idleness), which in turn is a translation of the Greek *askholía*, literally "the fact of not having any time," another expression with a negative denotation. In contrast, in many modern languages, Benveniste ([1969] 1976: 106–9) writes, the words corresponding to *negotium* do not have a negative sense but rather imply "having something to do," like *business* in English (from *busy*) or *affaires* in French (from *à faire*).

Those who can travel around the world in luxury certainly don't have to worry about delayed flights or waiting in a crowded travel agency to book their vacation. Instead, they can take their time, and they have the space in which to do so, such as the immense space around a sailboat on a solitary ocean voyage.

Today leisure and travel belong to the social practices and symbols that can represent both the greatest luxury and the greatest misery. Paradoxically, “not doing anything” in an absolute sense connects those who can indulge in the luxury of doing nothing with those who are obliged to do nothing. Travel and extreme mobility are the prerogatives of those who don’t need to work for a living but also of migrant workers, who move out of necessity or in the hope of a better life. Indeed, Italy was synonymous with luxury for the Albanian immigrants who arrived there in 1991 on an overcrowded boat and were then kept in quarantine in the old stadium of the city of Bari: Italy seemed to offer an affordable luxury, which they had seen in the glittering sequins and ephemeral hygiene on their TV screens. And so, bedazzled, they set sail. Luxury is the deformed mirror of our age, the screen or stage on which the motifs of nonfunctional waste and transgression of all limits—motifs profoundly rooted in being human—are measured against the abject forms now assumed by the distribution and possession of wealth in the world.

Leisure and travel are two rhetorical devices of luxury, two contexts in which one can unravel the thread of just how much the word *luxury* has meant and still means today. And we can’t avoid representing luxury on the stage, in films, and through images, gestures, and symbols—in other words, *seeing* it. Everest is the ultimate: you can scale 26,000 feet, even if you’re not a skilled mountaineer, on an expedition that allows you the sublime luxury of following your dream of getting to the top. But you can die there, too, in some cases. For years now, the highest mountain in the world has been crawling with wealthy dilettantes willing to pay high prices to participate in an expedition. For instance, the guide Rob Hall, who tragically perished, along with several others, on the expedition he was leading in May 1996, charged his clients US$65,000 each (Krakauer 1997). Add to that the cost of the journey to get there, plus equipment.

It might seem difficult at first to associate the image of such extreme travel with luxury, since the everyday risks of surviving at such high altitudes—as well as the values of sportsmanship and the dedication implicit in mountaineering—evoke a sense of “roughing it” and certainly exclude any conceivable physical comfort. And yet this is the most extreme challenge, beyond which there is perhaps only space travel. It is a luxury that involves “indulging in the luxury of …” perhaps just once in a lifetime, as in the case of the American Doug Hansen, who also perished on Hall’s expedition. He was a post office worker who had taken a second job in order to fulfill his dream of scaling Everest (Krakauer 1997). This luxury leaves a trail of litter and junk behind, from oxygen tanks to corpses, scattered across the Himalayas.

In recent years the Antarctic too has become a luxury tourist destination,

though certainly not because of the severe conditions the travellers have to face, but rather because of the prohibitive costs such a journey entails, on the one hand, and the symbolic challenge it represents, on the other. Like scaling the highest mountains, such a journey presupposes a specific kind of lifestyle, a passion for extremes that goes from the deepest feeling to the most eccentric whim. The tourism industry offers different types of travel in the Antarctic: flights over it in light aircraft, cruises on passenger liners or private yachts, or real polar expeditions, such as those offered by Adventure Network International,[2] a company specializing in Antarctic tourism whose three-month expedition Ski South Pole All the Way costs around US$64,000.

Such extremes have to do with a luxury that is uncomfortable, hostile, and adverse and that questions the relation between the human being—*a-Gro-ba* and traveler—and the natural world, whose balance and harmony she or he inevitably upsets. In the context of adventure travel, the image of the luxury tourist is constructed as an atypical figure, embodying the image and myth of the mountaineer, explorer, and pioneering scientist, on the one hand, and that of the wealthy eccentric with unlimited cash and free time, on the other. It is against this background of travel as extreme luxury that the passions fueling all the possible surrogates of the "dangerous journey" proposed by the tourism industry can be assessed. Dean MacCannell proposes an interesting sociosemiotic analysis of the tourist as a figure of modernity and also as "an early postmodern figure, alienated but seeking subjectivity in his [and her] alienation" (1989: xi).

SEA VOYAGES

A ship is a moving island: it brings migrating populations; it brings war; it brings power. Last century had its model of the perfect ship, the *Titanic*: first class up here, third class down there. Hans Magnus Enzensberger in the poem "The Sinking of the *Titanic*" ([1978] 1994) fathomed its social dialectic; in the film James Cameron and Leonardo DiCaprio celebrated the *Titanic*'s mythology, the former resorting to the luxurious technology of special effects, the latter triggering unbridled lust in his fans.

Today towering passenger liners plow the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, and the waters around Polynesia, offering tourists a decadent and Homeric mythology of travel that is both exotic and reassuring. The cruise has become a form of mass tourism tinged with an aura of luxuriousness arising from the symbologies of the great passenger liners: echoes of aristocratic intrigue on the Nile, literary Grand Tours around the Greek islands, lime daiquiris in the

Caribbean. Motifs halfway between elite and mass cultures are seasoned with the total look of an environment offering a monad of paradise, where there are gyms, pools, massage parlors, restaurants, bedrooms with balconies, escalators, and game rooms.

The Italian publicity campaign for Costa Crociere presented four TV ads with images of "postcruise depression" as their theme: an inconsolable woman in her ordinary bathtub recalls the delights of an onboard Jacuzzi, a young couple can't eat their breakfast as they remember the breakfast served in their cabin, a man standing on the balcony of his home despairs as he recalls the marvelous views from the deck, and—apotheosis—in a group therapy session everyone is crying because "returning to normal is so difficult." In this message targeting a large spectrum of the public—middle-class professionals around thirty-five years old—the significance of the cruise is that it is not simply a vacation but a journey "as great as the sea"[3] that intrudes on the everyday and dislocates it with a "luxuriating" strategy.

A more canonical form of luxury is represented by companies like Silverseas Cruises, whose vessels are veritable floating hotels: enormous, sumptuous suites, elegantly furnished, with refined details and objects (silverware, porcelain, and bed linen) from the international luxury industry (the brands Bulgari and Moët & Chandon are just two examples). Similarly, the *Hebridean Princess*, a Scottish luxury vessel that can accommodate no more than fifty passengers, offers canopied queen beds and haute cuisine, with an atmosphere a little like a private yacht, a little like an exclusive club.

The supreme emblem of luxury ocean travel, however, is an emir's yacht; the vision is that of the Marina Club in Manama, Bahrain, where oil dollars flow freely. The club is full of aristocratic superyachts, discreet crews, dinners surrounded by precious tapestries. The *Tigre d'Or* is a 180-foot yacht available for chartering; it has an interior in oak and marble; the finest furnishings, upholstery, and carpeting; a Jacuzzi and sauna, and so on. The *Wallypower 118* is a 118-foot luxury yacht with a futuristic design that was chosen for the 2003 *Wallpaper** exhibition entitled *New Wave* in Milan. Another image is the Greek island of Skorpios in the Ionian Sea, owned until 2013 by the Onassis family and now by a Russian billionaire; in its waters fabulous sailboats and yachts drop anchor in some secluded bay.

The sea surrounds its rituals and elites with a patrician aura: private clubs, specialized retailers, Henri Lloyd apparel and accessories. Even the tax on pleasure crafts represents a contemporary form of sumptuary law, though owning a boat often corresponds to a life philosophy that rejects the traditional trappings of luxury and is instead based on ideals and lifestyles that pursue the

exact opposite; for example, in the case of a sailboat, freedom, solitude, and the open air. Since February 2003 Verona has hosted an annual international exhibition on luxury called *Luxury & Yachts*, a kind of Vanity Fair whose very name evokes the model of the yachting life. From an economic perspective this "luxury fair" is intended to show that companies producing exclusive goods have a broader market of "spendability," a market for those who, apart from boats, might be interested in buying antiques, rare silks and jewels, or an Aston Martin. This is a fair with the sea as a background, on which the stars that shine aren't silver, as in the cliché, but platinum and diamonds.

SPORT

Today the motifs and symbols surrounding the sea and its luxuries are being reshuffled. The Louis Vuitton Cup, for instance, merges in its very name the luxury empire[4] and a popular sporting event. Similarly, Miuccia Prada's husband, Patrizio Bertelli—the chief executive officer of Prada and the owner of *Luna Rossa*—is himself a living symbol of the merging of the poles of economic and symbolic luxury: signs that are linked to Prada's role in a sporting context, on the one hand, and the fashion world, on the other, are becoming interwoven. In recent years this contamination had a considerable influence on mass culture, too: since *Luna Rossa*'s initial victories in 2000, many people who were not particularly interested in the vicissitudes of fashion, nor knew how to move deftly among designer labels, can now recognize the name Prada because they follow the America's Cup.

Luxury sport—whether foxhunting in the English countryside, golfing, or horse riding—requires an immense amount of space. It also requires a great deal of time, as well as money for equipment, and consumes scarce natural resources. Precious primary materials, such as foxes, are absolutely unique; indeed, Tony Blair attempted to ensure their survival in the United Kingdom against a tradition and a culture that are difficult to uproot, since their origins have to do with the advent of private property rights. Another example is water, used to irrigate golf courses, which is not only scarce in many parts of the world but also, when and where available, is needed for more important purposes.

In the film *Gosford Park*, set in England in 1932, director Robert Altman uses a hunting party at a country house as the occasion for portraying the relation between luxury and its grotesque parody. In a reworking of the ruthless dialectic between nobles and servants, all the visiting servants address one another by the surnames of their masters and mistresses. In doing so they reproduce the

hierarchy and cynicism of a society to which they don't belong; yet they are seduced by it and bound to it by obscure mechanisms, with an effect at times verging on the ferocious and the ridiculous. The grouse hunting, the meals that precede and follow it, the public and private conversations, the ostentation of dress and manner all become occasions to portray implacably the obscenity that luxury and wealth reveal in their most frivolous and otiose manifestations.

In our age, in which sport is both industry and entertainment, it is often difficult to know where the elitist and luxurious dimension of some sports ends and the socially exploitable dimension begins, from the international golfing championships seen on TV to the recognizable brands of the sponsors, as in the case of Prada. Yet it is unlikely that a grouse shoot or a foxhunt will have sponsors. But, then, there's no need for sponsors here, since the level of luxury is indeed stratospheric, as well as being inevitably branded with Englishness. A sponsor in these contexts would be considered in poor taste. But what about Formula One, for example, which is an incredibly expensive sport for the competitors too (who sometimes even pay with their lives) but has a very broad following? Or tennis, once the prerogative of the elite but now readily accessible to almost anyone? The impression is that, in sport, luxury is above all an aura made up of objects, signs, atmospheres, and discourses.

The aura surrounding Formula One includes beautiful women (there's always a supermodel to sanction the luxuriousness of the context), Monte Carlo, champagne on the podium, and unique automobile prototypes and brands—like Ferrari—for a very select market. An aura is close to myth, though it produces a subtler effect, which is consciously evanescent. Sailing and golf clubs, for example, do not represent overbearing myths of exclusiveness, though they often give off such an aura—the echo of splendors that are sometimes confirmed as such, sometimes revealed to be depleted and decadent. Where else can she wear those expensive Swarovski sandals, hand-embroidered with thousands of tiny sparkling crystals, if not by the pool of some imaginary exclusive club? In the territories of opulence, where is the boundary between sport and leisure, or between a sporting competition and a game of raising the stakes?

FEAR AND LOATHING

The grand hotels of the world have always belonged to the deluxe category, and they have never been ashamed to flaunt their services and atmospheres, in which a dwelling becomes a royal palace, a golden crib where you can stay, and play, for a while. Celebrating their memory and splendor means tapping into an

endless list of names: the Paris Ritz, visited by countless stars from Ernest Hemingway to Princess Diana; the Grand Hotel Rimini in Federico Fellini's film *Amarcord*; the Danieli in Venice; the Beverly Wilshire as the setting for *Pretty Woman*; the Park Hyatt Paris-Vendôme with its neoclassical interiors designed by Ed Tuttle. In these scenes the contemporary mythology has set opulence and comfort, the discretion of concierges and the indolence of chambermaids, equivocal exchanges, impossible loves, and big business transactions. John Jacob, a member of the Astor family, owners of the Waldorf-Astoria hotel chain, lost his life on the *Titanic*.

What does luxury look like today? Is its appearance grotesque or evanescent when it defines the forms and models of hospitality experienced by the traveler? In some places the Western tourist has to stay in a deluxe hotel in order to find Western-style accommodation: in Cuba and India but also in Manhattan, in order to avoid the rats and cockroaches. The luxurification of travel thus serves to prevent the experience of dislocation, the ever-present risk of the unforeseen, the fear of the other. Is mass luxury perhaps the boundary between the individual and others? Is it the gilded island where one can cover one's eyes and eat the proverbial cake, while elsewhere there isn't even any bread? There are, however, ways to travel that can move us more profoundly, eradicate our aversions, and build bridges instead of walls, even though they are ever more difficult to practice, paradoxically, in a world that should have all the right conditions and ambitions for an ever greater fluidity, communicability, and facility of movement. Such modes of travel might include sustainable tourism, responsible travel, and cultural tourism.

The most outrageous luxury reveals a brutal contrast when it materializes in those places that represent real monsters of opulence, for example, in the city where fear and loathing[5] (passions closer to luxury than one might at first imagine) are at home: Las Vegas. There, destiny and delirium, flashing lights and shining coins, jewels and dice, the Mafia and fifteen-minute fame, sweat and slot machines show us just how magnificent the dream of prosperity is in the Temple of Kitsch. "Luck be a lady tonight!" In Luxor, a hotel and casino in the shape of a pyramid, with an obelisk nearby, a sphinx beckons us on a crazy journey to a replica of the museum and tomb of King Tut. In this Disneyland of Egyptian magnificence, a cinematic simulator can even evoke imaginary inhabitants: in its gargantuan suites, in its bathtubs in polished marble and rhinestone, Cleopatra herself (maybe Liz Taylor in an oversized version) might appear. Luxor in Las Vegas represents the decor of an imaginary Egypt, where the affinity between the words *luxurious* and *Luxor* has never been more explicit or overloaded. James Twitchell suggests a pun based on the connotative values

of the words *luxury*, *Luxor*, and *Lexis* (2002: 224). The American scholar recounts his bizarre experience when he stayed for several days in the grand hotels of Las Vegas, which he compares to U.S. maximum-security prisons, such as Alcatraz and Sing Sing (215–38).

Another idea of luxury is also pursued in Las Vegas as a caricature that takes itself seriously: Italy. It is the Italy of patrician luxury, the calm of lakes and gardens, the Italy of Venice and Bellagio, on whose models the most outrageous deluxe hotels in the world have been built. At the Venetian hotel and casino you can see St. Mark's Belfry, the Doge's Palace, Rialto Bridge, and the Grand Canal complete with gondolas: this is better than the Venice represented in Luchino Visconti's or Woody Allen's films (*Death in Venice* and *Everyone Says I Love You*) or in Charles Aznavour's song "Que c'est triste Venice" (How sad Venice can be). The Venetian *is* Venice: the copy without the fog, the idea without the flooding, Tiepolo without time.[6] It is not a simulacrum or virtuality; it is more real than the real. The proof is in the shops and restaurants on the Grand Canal and the gondoliers with their striped jerseys, the Guggenheim Las Vegas, and Condé Nast Traveler's list of the world's best hotels, which includes both the Venetian and the Bellagio.

The Bellagio is the best. It is excess; it is every dream come true, the resort as a total experience, where travel stops time in order to pursue the risk of the game —chance and delirium—in the peace and quiet of a park, with the murmur of a thousand fountains on Lake Como: it is an almost perfect verisimilitude, animated by the music of your choice, Luciano Pavarotti or Frank Sinatra, Madonna or Elton John, Aaron Copland or Georg Friedrich Händel. Or, in an imaginary scene, George Clooney, Brad Pitt, and Andy Garcia could appear, as in *Ocean's Eleven*, the film set in this hotel-casino. The Bellagio is a postmodern royal palace dedicated to that empire of taste called Italy, immortalized by U.S. dollars in an excess of signs more real than the most real nightmare.

PLACES AND NONPLACES

Italy continues to be renowned across the globe as the cradle of timeless style and beauty. It is perceived as the birthplace of an antique luxury and a "manner" that has solid origins and a discreet charm. In the spring of 2003 the New York Fashion Institute of Technology dedicated an exhibition to Italian style (Salvatore Ferragamo, Walter Albini, Emilio Pucci, Sorelle Fontana, Gianni Versace, Antonio Marras, etc.) as a style that goes beyond fashion but that the latter has learnt through the legacy of a mastery rooted in arts and crafts.[7] Taste

understands this luxury because it is shaped by sobriety and knows its own limits. Rome and the Renaissance consecrate the origins of this way of seeing Italian luxury, which is often based on understatement and is more discreet than the luxury of France, overladen as it is with the Versailles stereotype. This luxury becomes the aura surrounding an Italian wine, a pair of shoes, a formal garden, and even Italian food, whose origins are nevertheless rooted in popular history, both peasant and maritime. As Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari write,

> The invention [of gastronomy] does not arise just from luxury and power but also from need and poverty (and this is basically the fascination of the history of cooking: to discover how men [and women], through labor and imagination, have sought to transform the grip of hunger and the anxiety of penury into … pleasurable occasions). (1999: xii)[8]

The imaginary Italian journey of a twenty-first-century English dandy[9] begins at Milan airport, where he can rent a Ferrari 360 Modena for US$1,300 a day; it then continues to the beautiful sites of Lake Como, Lake Garda, or Lake Maggiore, because in Italy going on vacation means being beautiful, and because leisure, gardens, yachts, risotto with porcini mushrooms, and fine linen sheets *are* Italian style. The grand tour continues in the triangle of luxury in Milan between Via Montenapoleone, Via della Spiga, and Corso Venezia, where boutiques, perfumeries, jewelers, and designer shoe shops open their doors to the rite of shopping and the art of window dressing. Presiding over all are the propitiatory stars: Gregory Peck continues to jump onto his Vespa as in the film *Roman Holiday*; in advertisements Harrison Ford drives a Lancia Lybra, and Gwyneth Paltrow wants a martini. Italy is the place where luxury is a modus vivendi.

Modern luxury is often fueled by a fascination with the exotic. In Baudelaire's poem *Invitation to the Voyage* (cited in the Introduction) two verses refer to exoticism: "The limpid mirrors / The oriental splendor." Today Oriental splendor is recreated by the glimmer of Chinese porcelain, the swish of silks and brocades, the sparkle of rare gems, the whiff of heady spices, the warmth of Persian carpets. The traveler and dreamer have learned to recognize such magnificence, which European empires pillaged from all over the world. The luxurious charm of the exotic was thus established in Western culture as a model of taste, and the farther away the culture whence this model came, the greater its hold on the Western society that appropriated it. At the end of the nineteenth century Georg Simmel described this mechanism with specific reference to fashion: he noted how the construction of certain fashions based on a taste for

exoticism guaranteed social cohesion, as if, in a common point of reference "faraway," society could find self-confirmation and empowerment. Simmel observed in his essay on fashion that in many societies the objects that arouse the greatest interest and have the highest symbolic value are those imported from *outside*. In other words, they are signs that are as uncommon in their place of arrival as they are common in their place of origin. The laws of fashion are very similar:

> Because of their external origin, these imported fashions create a special and significant form of socialization, which arises through mutual relation to a point without the circle. It sometimes appears as though social elements, just like the axes of vision, converge best at a point that is not too near. (Simmel [1895] 1904: 136)

Such cohesion was guaranteed in the West during the colonial era by the taste for exoticism, which has always conveyed an aura of luxuriousness and rarity, since it implicitly assuaged the feeling of guilt toward cultures whose fascination had to be kept at a distance, tamed and enslaved, in order for Westerners not to succumb to the shame of sensing other cultures as superior.

Today, however, globalization is obliterating distance and overturning the modernist pacification guaranteed by the exotic. Luxury thus invades every space in terrorist form and shows its difference by demolishing all other possible differences. Its nonplaces rise up as a direct challenge to the places of cultures. Today the songlines[10] of leisure are those of the Longitude 131° Resort in the dunes of the Australian desert in Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park, a luxury campsite with only fifteen tents, where you can watch the sun rise and set over Ayers Rock and dine under a canopy of stars. The fascination of elite tourism has the flavor of an entire island for rent: Necker Island in the Caribbean, owned by Richard Branson; D'Arros Island in the Indian Ocean, owned by the Pahlavi family of Iran; or others that are for sale or rent through the real estate agency Vladi Private Islands.

In our age the luxury of the exotic no longer has any meaning in a world in which everything everywhere is both exotic and familiar at the same time. Contemporary megacities find a reciprocal bond in the vessels of myths: brands, the nonplaces of consumption, corporate insignia dotting the cityscape. But is this identity? Is this the social cohesion that, in Simmel's theory, Western society should recognize in the distance of the other? Brands are paltry things when compared to the wealth of contaminated signs and languages, the pulsating of languages in contact with each other today in the sphere of living, and living together.

The image conjured up is the Tower of Babel, the most extreme luxury ever

desired by humankind: the luxury of being on a par with God. Yet the plurality of tongues with which God interrupted the construction of the tower shouldn't be seen as a condemnation but rather as a precious gift: the gift of reciprocal translation and the possibility of going beyond the limits within which a single tongue, a single place, a single identity held humankind. In the biblical tale of Babel, however, people didn't understand this gift and instead interpreted it as a condemnation. So they scattered all over the world fighting wars instead of finishing what would have been a beautiful and luxurious tower despite the babbling of tongues: a mythical version of the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the tower that stands at more than 2,600 feet.

New luxuries rise up today in an Oriental setting: China. The sumptuous splendors of the emperors, locked away in the Forbidden City, and the refinement of the Mandarins persist as the histories and symbols of ancient magnificence. In the last years of his life Deng Xiaoping conveyed his unusual vision of socialism, leading to an economic program that has made China part of the globalization process. Since the early 1990s Shanghai has become the symbol of this "New China," which erects monuments to verticality, like all the Towers of Babel around the world. In the Pudong district (the city's financial and commercial hub), the Jin Mao Tower, 1,381 feet in height, houses the Shanghai Grand Hyatt Hotel, a temple to luxury, while the luminous, futuristic Oriental Pearl Tower stands out like a kitsch expression of the technological luxurification of taste.

Rey Chow, a Chinese American scholar of visual culture and postcolonial studies, considers the growing commercial exchange between China and the capitalist West as serving the global biopower exercised over human beings. On the one hand, while China has taken steps to reinstate—albeit only partially—human rights, it exiles political dissidents and continues to incarcerate a great many people for their opposition to the government. On the other, Western companies now freely do business with a totalitarian regime that has a long history of violating human rights, including trafficking in the organs of executed prisoners, but that presents a veneer of having expiated its crimes against humanity. "It would perhaps be more productive, in light of Foucault's notion of biopower, to view the West and China as collaborative partners in an ongoing series of biopolitical transactions in global late capitalism, transactions whereby human rights, or, more precisely, humans as such, are the commodity par excellence" (Chow 2002: 20). Power over human bodies and the transformation of bodies into precious commodities are the conditions of the new luxury of the globalized world.

Even nature itself adapts and becomes more "natural" through technology,

like the lush vegetation of a virtual garden, or like the Palm Islands, three artificial islands built in the Persian Gulf off the coast of Dubai. Each island has the shape of a palm tree with seventeen branches and is surrounded by a protective breaker in the shape of a crescent moon. Each has grand hotels, luxury villas, theme parks, giant aquariums, and spas, as well as entertainment, leisure, and shopping centers. Their construction involved dredging about 3.5 million cubic feet of sand and rocks from the Gulf for both the foundations and the surface area of the islands. The residential buildings are comprised of a variety of styles, inspired by Arab, Mediterranean, European, Mexican, Scandinavian, and Asian living. There is a replica of Venice here, as in Las Vegas, and of Okinawa … hints of an aristocratic multiculturalism in the simulation of a kind of sumptuous Disneyland.

The crown prince of Dubai, Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktum, has conceived the Palm Islands as epitomizing the core themes of twenty-first-century pharaonic luxury, in which nature (palms, gardens, marine animals), technology, the elite tourism industry, and billion-dollar investments for the future, when oil will be scarce, all merge. The palms and crescent moons, visible from space like the Great Wall of China, symbolize a world inhabited by a multitude of ethnicities and cultures, which also includes immigrants to the wealthy Gulf states from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, employed as low-wage laborers on the construction sites of this unreal place.

APULIA

There is an olive grove with twisted, robust trees not seen anywhere else but here, in this land between the sea and the woods, called Gnathia by the Romans, where Japigians and Messapians founded their early civilizations. Among the trees is a pool, which could be a lake, except that there are no natural lakes here. A tower in light *tufo*—the calm roughness of dry-stone walls and white stone—looks to the far-off sea. The brackish, viscous *acqua di Cristo*[11] is used to irrigate vegetable gardens and the eighteen-hole golf course. Luxury farmhouses (called *masserie*) provide a five-star rural tourism experience, complete with antique furniture and fine linens, serving local cooking upgraded to haute cuisine.

In saltwater therapy, the sea washes away your pains, especially when the waves lap your body in the transparent heat of a glass solarium. Ayurvedic therapies and sensations of Oriental well-being are experienced next to the quarry where the *tufo* stone was cut. Here you can smoke a cigar and drink an Islay whiskey in this age of mass prohibition. Jacuzzis and English chandeliers

encrusted with gems are found in the rooms. And outside it is the landscape that seems to speak with its beauty. Why recreate it artificially like Las Vegas? Here there is no need to steal space from the land. Here, where the Adriatic washes eastern shores, Nature is as robust as the trunk of an ancient olive tree and has the special luxury of participating in the ambients that humans have created. The long summer nights from April to October bear witness to this, with the sound of accordions playing at the peasant festivals in the vales, while near the sea, multicolored illuminations light up the saints' effigies and, against the sky, strobe lights beat out the rhythms of the beach parties.

Masserie in Apulia have always been hubs of rural life, as well as places for the production of goods, traditions, worship (there is always a chapel on the grounds), and *arte povera*, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the provinces of Bari and Brindisi the numerous masserie make this one of the most densely populated territories in southern Italy. San Domenico and Torre Coccaro, which have recently been converted into luxury resorts, were originally strongholds against Saracen invasions. The typical restoration of these old rural structures, which includes refurbishing the areas of production (olive presses, stables, quarries), takes on a special significance when they are intended for elite tourism. Rusticity, which is a consolidated added value of mass tourism and gastronomy, is imbued with a quasi-authentic flavor in its luxury version: the polished stone floors, the windows facing the sea (on the lookout for Turks), the suite set in the orange grove, the conference room in the underground olive press all give Torre Coccaro the feel of a niche for the select few. At San Domenico, it is the olive trees with their twisted trunks that enhance the splendors of the place when it is mentioned in high-class tourism magazines.

Along the coasts of Apulia a web of memories has been woven for over a decade: Albanian and Kurdish refugees crammed in boats landing on these shores; sea passages that have changed the faces and languages of this frontier, as well as the idea itself of travel and hospitality, and that have opened or closed hearts and homes. *Li Turchi*[12] are today the new slaves, on whose bodies the illegal trafficking in human beings is played out. In contrast, in the orange grove, a refined English tourist is learning the recipe for *tiedd*.[13]

We leave through the electronic gates of these charming estates, where we would have enjoyed spending the night near the murmuring sea, enjoying calmness, shining waxed furniture, exotic flowers, Eastern refinement. Yet what does luxury know of this land, this sea frontier touching one coast and the other, and connecting, rather than separating, people? What welcome of the other can this distinguished hotelier art teach a land that knows so well the innate love of foreigners? To what extent, here and elsewhere, does the invitation to the voyage

test its own luxuriousness in the sphere of human cohabitation? And whatever happened to the sense of departure here?

Figure 8 Jogo certo python. © James Wojcik.

Figure 9 Pearls. © James Wojcik.

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Wellness

UNDERGROUND

Philip K. Dick's novel *The Penultimate Truth* (1964) describes a humanity decimated by World War III and living in underground "ant tanks," where survival is close to unbearable, in order to escape the radiation and ongoing warfare on the earth's surface. At least that is the official version the "tankers" see on their TV screens, while they are urged to continue the production of robot combatants called "leadies." The truth, however, is quite different: the war is over, and the earth's surface is inhabited by small groups of individuals who have appropriated vast amounts of wealth and property and are now fighting among themselves to gain control of even more space, wealth, and power. The image of an underground world where human life is reduced to conditions of mere subsistence, exploited (symbolically or actually) by those who live on the surface, is a common theme in both literature and film. The modern prototype is undoubtedly Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), which portrays the stark contrast between a gloomy, subjugated underground world and the open spaces of a luxurious futuristic city on the surface, where Fredersen (the city's potentate) lives in the bright, sumptuous rooms of a palatial dwelling. The conflict between high and low, open and closed, luxury and misery, ownership and exploitation finds its dark, deprived, and miserable pole in this "base" or "underground" dimension.

However, in a strange twist, the "baseness" of bomb shelters—or, today, nuclear bunkers—could now be considered a luxury, a corollary of the mansion and private jet, a sign denoting the power and prestige of those who own one. Their lives are considered more valuable than those of common mortals and so have to be protected. Whether oil magnate or business tycoon, Mafia boss or sponsor of international terrorism, their underground life is imagined as similar to their surface one: filled with hypertechnologies, gourmet foods, designer shoes, and high-class call girls. Is this the fantastic vision of someone who has seen too many films, as the saying goes, or a situation closer to reality than we

might at first think? Is the “new luxury” like Saddam Hussein’s famous bunker, which is supposed to have cost US$66 million and was designed by the architect Karl Bernd Esser (Boyes 2003)?

In 2002 shelters and gear to protect against chemical weapons were being sold in Kuwait months in advance of the U.S. attack on Iraq because of the anticipated reprisals. Among these items was a sterile and impermeable tent produced in Finland and sold for the exclusive price of US$13,000; the market for it was the select clientele of the luxury bazaar Villa Moda, a mall in Kuwait City selling the big European brand names, from Fendi to Yves Saint Laurent, and owned by Sheik Majed al Sabah. An icon of style, dandy, and member of the royal family, the sheik wanted to turn Kuwait into a trendy beach resort, with high-end shopping malls and spas, a place where one could find Prada caftans and Cappellini furniture. Was the contrast between war and peace, or between luxury and peace? Or was it a war for luxury? But what happens if you go into one of those US$13,000 antigas tents and never come out again, whether metaphorically or actually? Luxury cannot save you.

During the Cold War, especially around the time of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the U.S. government set up a program of building atomic bunkers for the civilian population, which was, however, soon abandoned due to its prohibitive costs. Bunkers on U.S. territory later became an option for the most paranoid of the middle classes when they bought a house. Today, in many countries, insurance against terrorist attacks is not as unusual as one might think; even the insurance companies are protecting themselves, given the extreme uncertainty of the risk of attacks, on the one hand, and their harrowing topicality in social imagery, on the other. Insurance in this case becomes a cash shelter, a virtual bunker, a symbolic underground place more like the vault of a bank than the ant tanks in Dick’s novel. It is certainly not a type of investment for the masses but a luxury for the few in order to safeguard their possessions, such as valuable furniture, works of art, and so on; in other words, private assets are increasingly considered at risk.

Even the external form of the buildings commissioned by the insurance giants for their most prestigious branches is a kind of metaphor for the sense of equilibrium and confidence that luxury has the presumption to guarantee. Norman Foster designed the “Gherkin” for the new London offices of the Swiss Reinsurance Company: 590 feet tall, comprising forty-one stories, it is built on a circular plan, the shape of which recalls a cigar—the gruff and smoky symbol of an English lord. This building is promoted as ecological, transparent to sunlight and permeable to wind due to its aerodynamic structure. New technologies and ecological imagery merge in the new strategies of luxury in order to assure

complete coverage, both literal and metaphorical, against risk.

Risk: we are aware just how much this word means in the world today, just how much its chaotic unpredictability endangers the Kuwaiti sheik, the Manhattan denizen, the populations of Baghdad and Abidjan, the vacation resorts of Sharm el-Sheikh, the casinos of Las Vegas, and the boat people of the Pacific and Mediterranean alike. Thus the luxury item comes to be perceived as the shelter par excellence, much safer than the bomb shelters built in the Kennedy era, which have now become tourist attractions, curious specimens of twentieth-century archaeology. Luxury covers a territory that is both more reassuring and more up-to-date than the shelter, at least apparently. And luxury has its symbols, too: billion-dollar insurance policies and, once again, gold. Gold fever is rising, as shown by its stock market value and an increase in its signs, from fashion to furnishings, from cooking to everyday items. Gold appears on clothing; Charlize Theron emerges from liquid gold in the ad for the perfume J'adore; laminated gold covers the Juicy Salif, the juicer designed by Philippe Starck for Alessi. Gold even coats language, where metaphors such as "covered in gold" and "swimming in gold" suggest the quasi-magical and fetishist power of this metal.

Protection and reassurance on the one hand, challenge and risk on the other: these are the complex desires that contemporary luxury unleashes and around which it constructs its scenes of *well-being*, conceived as wealth and affluence. This concept of well-being is used both to define Western societies as hypocritical and to indicate the healthiness of the senses and the individual body. New Age philosophies in the West have given this word a spiritualist and environmentalist interpretation, setting themselves up with ideologies and ethics that propose a return to nature and individualism. Yet, better than transcendence or meditation, contemporary luxury shows us the ease it provides, and not merely in the sense that money buys happiness. This would be too banal, and besides we aren't talking about happiness but about something that goes beyond and that brings in its wake conflict, tension, and excitement. For luxury speaks a more complex language than wealth; it speaks of modes of production in which commodities and signs, primary goods and passions intersect. Luxury highlights the starkest contrast, not between nature and culture, nature and technology, or human society and life, but between extreme baseness and the extreme limit, coexisting in the same place. In the megacities of our age, the ant tanks and the surface world, the underground city and the city of light, the shelter and the military or terrorist target are now simultaneously on the same territory, and every place on earth is part of the social and individual conflict that luxury reveals.

HOMES

Number 11 Ocean Drive, Miami, July 15, 1997: Andrew Cunanan shoots and kills Gianni Versace in front of the gates to his villa, Casa Casuarina. The mansion was built in the 1930s and modeled on the sixteenth-century Alcazar de Colon in Santo Domingo that Christopher Columbus had built for his son Diego. Versace bought the villa in 1992 and filled it with art treasures, turning it into a magnificent and luxurious dwelling, as only he knew how. Indeed, the adjective *neobaroque* (Calabrese 1987; also Versace and Calabrese 1993) was coined in Italy to define the Versace style: a late twentieth-century baroque that celebrates an opulence of forms and a cocktail effect of contrasting styles. It verges on the kitsch without ever touching it, instead just hinting at it and reworking it with the extreme refinement of an artist's measure. Princess Diana and Elton John were his friends, as well as the ambassadors of his style, a style characterized by a knowing game, poised between dose and overdose that has come to define the luxurious context of which Versace was lord and master.

The mansion on Ocean Drive was filled with masterpieces and precious artifacts: Antoine Dubost's *Return of Helen*; Sophie Rude's *Death of Cenchrias, Son of Neptune*, which hung in the bedroom; mosaics and sculptures; European and Indian rarities; and neoclassical, rococo, and Empire furniture. These were all listed in Sotheby's 2001 catalog, when the entire contents of Versace's residence—from velvet cushions to pieces designed by Versace himself—were put up for auction, just as two years earlier his twenty-five Picassos had been auctioned. A cruelly ironic fate led him to die in front of the ornate wrought-iron gates of his own mansion, to which he had added a swimming pool and patio, demolishing the adjacent Revere Hotel in order to do so. This was the fate of an urban dandy and a rare artist; this was the fate of a spree killer, who fired the shot and then committed suicide a few days later, relentlessly pursued by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the media alike. This was the fate of rags and of crepe de chine printed with the faces of Marilyn Monroe and James Dean, like the dress Versace designed in 1991 as an homage to Andy Warhol. Is this fate, or is it the contemporary story of what luxury both conceals and reveals? The answers lies in the parable of ease and comfort that takes on the shape of these walls, furnishings, and gardens called home, only for a moment, while a moment later the heirs dismantle everything and sell that same home for US$19 million to the billionaire Peter Loftin. He has turned it into a museum of fashion, thereby saving something of the Italian designer's dignity. Palazzo Versace, a name to define a space, has now moved to the other side of the globe and has become a deluxe hotel on the Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia.

The elaborate aesthetic that Versace transferred to his idea of home, and that he was able to realize and enjoy in his Miami villa, sadly for only a few years, is exemplary in showing the different nuances of luxury in the context of domestic space and private property. The house becomes the place of art, harmony, and conviviality. The quest for beauty becomes the quest for luxury, as if the Platonic coincidence between beauty and goodness were now explicitly translated into that between beauty and well-being. But the life and death of the Italian designer also reveal the tensions concealed by that harmony. In the symbolic histories of our age there is often a madman who pulls the trigger, and the victim might be called either John Lennon or Gianni Versace. But that act of folly took place in front of the gates of a happy isle, whose keynote was the most exclusive refinement and sophistication, the most sublime luxury, and not in a Roman suburb like the one where Pier Paolo Pasolini's life ended. And this in itself has a darker meaning: luxury doesn't always offer protection.

Is protection, ease, or power what the real estate ads for the oversized residential apartments in the Trump World Tower—available to rent even for a short stay in Manhattan—are promising? Billionaire Donald Trump's skyscraper was completed in 2001—annus horribilis for towers in New York—and its height dominates the nearby Empire State Building and Chrysler Building. The Trump World Tower has a wellness center and spa, gardens, and every other kind of facility that a twenty-first-century hyperbuilding can provide. In every apartment there are precious marbles, the latest digital technology, and windows giving an exceptional view over the city, especially in the 5,382-square-foot penthouse that offers a full panorama of the skyline and East River.

Space is a key word in the mythologies of contemporary luxury that narrate just how little space there is in the world today. The space you can see from the top of a tower in the middle of an overcrowded city is equal to dominion over that world, in the happy individualism conjured up by the image of home, even if it is a temporary home, as ephemeral as stocks and bonds for a junior broker. The typical medley of streets and houses in nineteenth-century Paris inspired Walter Benjamin's reflections on the collective dimension that the dialectic between street and home represented for mass society:

> Streets are the dwellings place of the collective. The collective is an eternally unquiet, eternally agitated being that—in the space between the building fronts— experiences, learns, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls. (Benjamin [1982] 1999: 423)

The opposite of this collective dimension—the value of space in exclusive luxury homes in the contemporary metropolis—is based instead on the happy

isolation of the new elites. In this sense luxury is indeed space, though it is not a deserted space, as we can see from the image of the apartment (with five bathrooms) on the fifty-fourth floor of the Trump Tower: from its windows you can look far down on the bright lights and bustle of the world below. A sense of ease takes shape in the enormous interval that luxury places between the world and home.

In *The Philosophy of Money* Georg Simmel notes how money allows people to create the distances, boundaries, and privacy that allow them to survive in the traffic and reciprocal pressures of modernity. For Simmel these distances are enhanced by the fact that personal wealth consists in means of production in the capitalist system (and not consumer objects, as in primitive cultures), and so various intermediate stages separate the proprietor from the ultimate goal of possession ([1900] 1978: 76). Today personal wealth and lifestyles are based entirely on these intermediate stages, which are of the nature of signs. Luxury represents the quintessence of these stages because it is not just wealth but the representation of wealth.

Among these signs, today high tech is a form of luxury. High tech means you can open your front door and turn on the lights with a voice command; water the plants or turn on the air-conditioning with a text message; heat up your dinner right on the table; ask your wardrobe for advice on what to wear, based on the season and the outside temperature; get the shopping list from the fridge itself; video-call via the TV; and link your home alarm system to a satellite network. Home automation offers this and more, in a vision somewhere between futuristic myth and homeland security, between wealthy metropolitan neighborhoods and the overcrowded stands of the Panasonic Center in Tokyo. Yet luxury wants more: extra-extra-large home entertainment, home theaters for family videos, Dolby surround amplifiers are hidden behind house plants or blend in with the designer furniture, huge ultraflat screens, and a Mark Levinson console, in a setting of marble, stucco, tapestries of a phantasmagoric skyline, and strobe lights. This image of a hypothetical dwelling is based on fragments and glimpses of some homes of the famous,[1] where high tech is synonymous with luxury, where it is freed from utilitarian aims and becomes the private property of entertainment, special effects, and the marvelous as a reality for the few. The mansion is transformed into a personal theater.

In the presidential palaces of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad and Basra, whose gates were smashed open by troops from the U.S. 3rd Infantry Division and the Royal Marines in April 2003, the rooms are now empty; the tapestries, classical columns, and gold faucets are lavish; the marble floors gleam. In Baghdad, the presidential palace on the Tigris was full of marbles, crystals, and precious

ceramics, with high-vaulted ceilings; in Basra, the palace on the Shatt al-Arab had inlaid wood revetment, high windows, and elaborately decorated walls. These became the spoils of war, after they were designated “special sites” by the United Nations inspectors. More than homes, these palaces were symbols of a decadent power and luxury; their interiors were first seen on TV only after the dictator’s fall, but by then the war had turned them into a different kind of sign by sullying their splendor.

FOOD

Elegant mirrors, candlesticks, and rococo kitsch, like the restaurant in Peter Greenaway’s film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*; minimalist and restrained Zen interiors; or comfortable armchairs for tasting food in a relaxed lounge atmosphere: these are three possible settings for the new luxury of the restaurant industry, three styles for ambients designed to accommodate the ritual of the public meal at the beginning of the twenty-first century. There is an explicit, encoded definition for luxury restaurants, just as there is for luxury hotels. Moreover, it is often the *aura* of luxury that unmistakably characterizes the privileged and refined access to food, the ability to recognize the delicacy of certain dishes, ingredients, and beverages, to share in the exclusiveness of a secret recipe. This is the emblematic image of luxury presented by Gualtiero Marchesi in his recipe for *risotto all’oro* (risotto with gold),[2] in which he retrieves the legend of the use of saffron as a substitute for gold in the famous Italian dish *risotto alla milanese* (risotto in the style of Milan).

Gourmandise, the pleasures of the palate, as Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin noted, originated in the sphere of luxury that characterizes humanity. Though eating is indeed a necessity, taste has instead to do with desire. A useless prerogative, perhaps, when one’s survival is at stake, taste nevertheless speaks to us of a luxury that goes beyond abundance and wealth, and that resides in the complex sensuality regulating the relation between the body and what it ingests. The multiplicity of human senses gives rise to that “sixth sense” Brillat-Savarin called the “genesiac sense”[3] and to the synesthesia in every act of tasting, even when it is driven by hunger.

In Roman Polanski’s film *The Pianist* (2002) the protagonist’s hunger is depicted in stark, essential terms. The hero, the Polish Jew Wladyszlaw Szpilman, has escaped the Nazi deportation and lives amid the rubble of the German-occupied Jewish ghetto in Warsaw. In one scene in particular the pianist eats with sensual relish a stale potato, which becomes a metaphor for starvation

everywhere, whether in the ghetto or the concentration camp, the desert or the city. Even here, in the inhuman dimension of life at the limits, the human desire to *taste* food supplants the ground zero of mere necessity. This desire is a sort of luxury that reveals the imagery of taste and eating in all its most significant symbology, exposed at the boundaries of lust.

In order to evoke the multiple senses that taste stimulates, today deluxe restaurants and bars provide an atmosphere of total wellness as part of their philosophy. This includes not only staff etiquette, impeccable place settings, and a precise syntax in the use of silverware, crystal, and porcelain, as taught in the handbooks of classical luxury, but also lights and music, furnishings and scents, and even relaxing massages during the meal, or a hot bath. These culinary practices bring together customs and languages, East and West, multiculturalism and translation; the last is always a part of serving food. *Kaiseki*, the ritual of Japanese haute cuisine, includes purifying baths and reflective pauses during the meal. A moment of languor accompanies the tasting of mint tea or coffee and is part of a decelerated time in the new deluxe Oriental or Arab cafés, in which we find the hybrid atmosphere and colors of Western cities. The overladen banquet table and the waste of the potlatch described by Marcel Mauss have no place in this sphere of luxury, comprised of French nouvelle cuisine, Japanese sushi, and the art (both global and local) of wine tasting that offers just a sip in each goblet. What is measured, therefore, is not Pantagruelian quantity but quality, even in the revisitation of Mediterranean cooking, a cuisine that is usually known for both quality and quantity.

MORE CULINARY LUXURIES AND LUSTS

In an ad for Evian, a young woman uses a bottle of Evian water to fill her fishbowl. In another ad, in elegant surroundings, a barman pours two bottles of Evian into a shaker as if he were about to make a cocktail. A third ad shows a woman in a bathtub filled with Evian, as we see from the dozens of empty bottles on the floor. In these three visual texts a simple element like water is the subject of luxurification: in other words, the amplification and expansion of its meaning exalt it through a paradoxical and improbable leap. Who partakes more of luxury in this strategy? The goldfish swimming around in expensive bottled water? The young woman wasting it on a fish instead of drinking it? The woman in the bath? Or the water as such, about to become a sophisticated, imaginary cocktail? Buying a bottle of mineral water is now an everyday luxury, yet water itself is a luxury in extreme conditions, like war, when it is one of the first

provisions to be rationed or cut in cities under siege. And today water even vies with oil in triggering greed and warfare, since clean water is an increasingly scarce natural element, paradoxically so, in a world full of bottles of Evian and Perrier.

The gratuitous act of a woman taking a bath in Evian water, as if it were ass's milk in patrician Rome or the champagne of courtesans, tells of the rare luxuries into which our real or imagined acts of eating and drinking can be transformed, and in which food and drink become precious and sensual. Caviar is photographed to look like black pearls. Raspberries on a platinum dish are transformed into glittering gems, or, conversely, a ruby is treated like a strawberry. In a jeweler's window, a mound of pearls is served in a champagne glass of the finest crystal. Fashion tells of melted chocolate on a Moschino handbag. The only trace of a vodka is the name Absolut on a Gaultier dress. A male hand holds chopsticks to taste sushi served on the prone, naked body of a blindfolded woman. A cigarette with lipstick on it is put out in an egg yolk. An ice cream is named after one of the seven deadly sins, lust. These are contemporary visions taken from photos, ads, and consumer and fashion products that portray the nexus luxury/lust in food and drink; in them taste is connected to visual pleasures and a composite sensuality, imagined as inaccessible and exclusive.

Greed is one of the seven deadly sins, like *lust*, a word whose etymology is related to *luxury*. It is especially in the sphere of orality, in eating and drinking, that the concepts of lust and luxury overlap. The libidinous pleasures of this sphere have to do with the waste Georges Bataille associated with eroticism, feasting, sacrifice, and death ([1957] 1986; [1967] 1988). Eros is expending energy, canceling the boundaries between bodies, losing substance—*dépense* (expenditure) in an absolute sense. Incorporating otherness through food is the pleasure of desire as a luxury of the senses. And the more elaborate and luxurious the preparation of a dish, the greater the composite and erotic intensity of the taste. The Italian semiotician Augusto Ponzio writes that the culinary dish is a sign—"a text on more or less complex levels of intertextuality and elaboration"—and is different from food per se, which tends instead "to a ground zero of the sign." A culinary dish, Ponzio continues, is not instrumental; it is not depleted in the satisfaction of a need but can be "something totally superfluous, unmotivated; [something] that has no use" (1982: 77).

In the short story "Babette's Feast"[4] by Isak Dinesen ([1958] 2001), the exquisite dinner Babette prepares for the frugal members of a Lutheran sect in a Norwegian village restores a lost harmony and warmth to the small community. Babette was once the chef at the Café Anglais in Paris, and she is able to prepare

this extraordinary meal because she has won the grand prize of 10,000 francs in the French lottery. Her money therefore arrives by chance, through fate, through the wasteful pleasure typical of the gambler. Roger Caillois sees this kind of risk as something unpredictable and nonfunctional, as a challenge to fate, in which the player is passive and abandoned to his or her destiny. Above all, writes Caillois, risk "grants the lucky player infinitely more than he could procure by a lifetime of labor, discipline, and fatigue" ([1967] 2001: 17).

Babette spends all her winnings to buy the living ingredients for the meal, which she goes to Paris to choose: live turtles for a delicate broth, live quails for the funereal but sublime *cailles en sarcophage*, rare wines such as a Close Vougeout 1846. There is always something obscure and slightly demonic in naming objects, in animating the inanimate and obscenely "baptizing" the inorganic. But the wine too is alive, and the sign-name it bears, together with the year of its birth, is what makes it recognizable and unique and allows its twofold passage through orality: both in speech and in taste.

"In *Babette's Feast*, the materiality of the festive meal substitutes the everyday norm of spirituality and parsimony. The luxury of the feast reaches the sacred better than any fasting" (Ricci and Ceccarelli 2000: 114).[5] So, during Babette's feast, the sobriety and self-restraint regulating the small pious community are disrupted by the unique and exceptional luxury of the meal, by a mild lust that softens the words and senses and warms the blood of the elderly participants. Among them is an illustrious guest, General Loewenhielm, who recognizes the hand of the great culinary artist he once so admired at the Café Anglais. Babette had fled Paris because she was a *pétroleuse*, as the women of the Commune[6] who set fire to houses were called. But she was also the artist who gratified the palates of the aristocratic clientele at the Café Anglais, some of whom were responsible for starving the Parisian populace and murdering her husband and son. So what is the deeper significance of the luxury made manifest by her feast? She gets to be an artist once again. She enchants the angels. She gives herself the priceless gift of showing everyone that she is a great chef. And there haven't been many great women chefs—past, present, or in literature—in the lists of the international culinary elite.

Obscure motives and lusts from faraway are portrayed in Joanne Harris's novel *Chocolat* (1999) and the film based on the book. In this tale, too, it is a female figure who unleashes a storm of desire and pleasure, both gastronomic and erotic, in the seeming tranquility of a narrow-minded French village in the late 1950s. Vianne Rocher, played by Juliette Binoche in the film, arrives with her daughter from a distant, unspecified part of the world—perhaps Andalusia, but before that, she led a nomadic life, like her ancestors—and opens a chocolate

shop in the village. It is not just a shop but a place that offers flavors and skills in creating the sensual luxuries of chocolate, an “unnecessary” food, imbued with an aphrodisiacal power and a magic that can enchant the taste buds and sometimes even heal. Vianne works the chocolate in a thousand ways: making pralines and other delicacies, and blending cacao with spices and chili pepper. These mixtures change the village life, bringing to light unconfessed or stifled sentiments and passions: a couple rediscovers their torpid desire; a child is reconciled with his grandmother, who, though diabetic, regains her zest for life by eating chocolate again and dies happy. Chocolate is dark, and eating dark things often has the flavor of something forbidden and luxurious, bordering on the lustful: caviar, squid ink, coffee, and truffles are all dark foodstuffs.

Chocolate arrived in Spain from Mexico in the sixteenth century, together with other spoils from Hernán Cortés’s blood-soaked conquest. Cortés discovered it among the Aztecs, for whom it was a precious and noble foodstuff. From Spain, it spread to other parts of Europe in the following century; according to Brillat-Savarin, it was especially prized by women and monks ([1826] 2004: 50–1). But the chocolate eaten in the colonies was bitter, as it always is when it is pure; and it was bitter in the Mayan civilization as well, where it was first used, both as a luxury good and as currency. Cacao was at least as bitter as the history of sugar: in European society sugar, a commodity ascribable to the sphere of luxury, was congenial to the early capitalist accumulation of wealth.[7] *Chocolat* implicitly evokes the obscure colonial origin of the dark substance, an origin associated with Vianne herself, the hybrid offspring of a Mayan, from whom she has inherited her nomadic fate of disseminating, through her chocolate making, a food of the gods. Bearer of an ancient myth, she brings it to the modern world through a sign already present in her surname: Rocher, today an industrial manufacturer of chocolate.

WATER AND SWEAT

Passing slowly by the waters, crossing the thermal baths to the healing fountains, Benjamin’s flâneurs were imagined walking in the Schuls Tarasp gorge or near the Karlsbad springs.[8] They were near legendary water courses, where this pure liquid gently healed the body, in a leisurely, aristocratic rite of passage tinged with the sinister taste of disease: this was the decadent taste the baths kept for the whole of the twentieth century, even when their curative waters became a mass consumer good and the flaneurs of old were transformed into a crowd of thirsty patients.

Today luxury gives a different aura to the beneficial effects of water on the body, one in which the whiff of disease has disappeared altogether, replaced by a sensuality that draws its suggestions from both the licentiousness of Roman baths and the refined exoticism of Oriental systems of holistic wellness. So the *spa*, now a common word in tourism,[9] is today a wellness center in grand hotels and luxury resorts, even in the absence of thermal springs. The *Four Seasons Explorer*, a catamaran with eleven cabins, offers Balinese and Ayurvedic massages onboard, while Ananda in the Himalayas is a destination spa in the former residential palace of the Maharajat of Tehri Garhwal, offering Ayurvedic, Vedantic, and yogic therapies combined with the latest international health therapies and beauty treatments.

The Therme Vals in Switzerland[10] were rebuilt in 1996 by the architect Peter Zumthor, using Valser quartzite from the surrounding mountains. In his project the architect followed an ideal of absolute sobriety, in which the archetype of the primordial relation between water and stone in natural thermal baths is expressed. There is no intrusion of bright lights in this model of bodily wellness, but instead a rigor so essential that it crosses the boundary into the new "conceptual" luxury, guaranteed here by aesthetic values that exalt the senses: the contrast between light and shade amid the natural steam rising from the water, the sound of water flowing over stone, the sensation of hot rock on the skin. This luxury is concentrated, too, in the meticulous construction of the establishment, using thousands of layers of stone slabs, each cut with absolute precision.

The authentic wellness of the body, its harmony, and its balanced integration with nature and other bodies have been the quest of societies in every age, as we see in the tradition of thermal baths, Turkish baths, Finnish saunas, and Oriental massages: moments and places of socialization as well as cure. These are places where the body is pampered and empowered in its harmonious and balanced relation with nature, space, and time. These are places that luxury can create using a blend of traditions and styles. The Grand Hotel et de Milan (whose illustrious guests have included Giuseppe Verdi, Tamara de Lempicka, Luchino Visconti, and Maria Callas) now has a fitness center with the latest technological equipment and a personal trainer available on request, while Gianfranco Ferre's flagship store in Milan also has a wellness center, specializing in aromatherapy, hydrotherapy, and thalassotherapy. So the benediction of the designer name guarantees a precious and refined patina in the cure of the body and has the thaumaturgic presumption to heal it of the stressful rhythms of everyday life.

Today access to the bodily luxury called wellness takes place through high-tech accoutrements, on the one hand, and exotic and natural evocations, on the

other. In this sense luxury becomes virtuous; in other words, it is not wasteful, except in indulging bodily pleasures that require a shift to other places and dimensions, transfiguration, protection, or indeed invisibility.

The preciousness of life itself is at stake, and the new luxury protects it. Luxury is also what design, technology, and fashion together reinvent with protective garments and materials used as decorative elements: polycarbonate helmets, aluminum back protectors, calico and satin corsets, safety jackets. While these are certainly useful objects and prosthetics, designed in research labs for space travel and ergonomics, the new protective materials and objects are also used in extreme sports, motorcycling, and boat racing. However, the moment such objects undergo an intersemiotic transmission to contexts where they are not used out of necessity, they explicitly reveal how the human body, in a biopower regime, has become a luxury item to be protected and defended from the wear and tear of time and other such dangers. Indeed, the body is now an item that could even indulge in the final frontier of luxury, far beyond cosmetic surgery: the optical mimetics of invisibility, achieved by wearing a mimetic garment made of plasma microscreens, nanochips, and optical fiber sensors that reflect the surroundings and thereby cancel out all physical trace of the wearer. Such research is still in its infancy, though it has already had a luxurious application, at least in science fiction: James Bond's Aston Martin.

POISON AND VANITY

Purple poison, love potion: the woman in the image has her hair piled up like a new millennium Odette.[11] A white doll in lace and silk, her shoulders lasciviously bare, with black stockings that allow a glimpse of the white skin of her legs, she is seated in front of the mirror of her desires, like a painting of the deathly image of *vanitas*. The round mirror resembles a skull and reflects the backdrop of draped white curtains. The woman's dark hair, reflected in the mirror, emphasizes her dark eye cavities; the bottles and phials on her dressing table resemble grinning teeth. The illusion—of sight and smell in reciprocal interference—shows us a skull as a memento mori and gives a voice to the ad for a perfume with a deadly name: Poison. The drawing *All Is Vanity* by Charles Allen Gilbert (1873–1929) is the inspiration behind the postmodern vanity of this perfume ad. *Vanity* is also another word for "dressing table," now a vintage piece of furniture, where women would sit to comb their hair and anoint themselves with scent. Luxury is a beautiful woman at a mirror, who can both die of fascination and kill with it. *Fascination* is a word combining the obscurity

of the spell with the spectral threat of the evil eye marking one's fate irrevocably. In the witch's bowl, the drops of oil compose the shape of one's fate; the bottle of perfume contains the refined transformations of the body, ennobled … or rendered corpse-like.

Love, beauty, luxury, death: the motif of *vanitas vanitatum* returns in the serial reproduction of photography and advertising and recalls the creeping fugacity of worldly virtues, but also their spectral seduction. The elegance of a perfume rekindles a baroque luxury through its reference to what underlies that luxury: the challenge to death but also the admonitions that death addresses to its challengers. The beautiful woman at the mirror in advertising is a contemporary version of Hans Baldung Grien's *Death and the Maiden*, in which a woman looks in the mirror while Death embraces her like a dark lover. Bataille writes:

> It is to death—to the vision of death as all-powerful, a terrifying death, which nonetheless draws us toward an enchantment laden with all the terrors of witchcraft—it is to death, to the rot of death, and not to pain, that Baldung Grien links the attraction of eroticism. ([1961] 1989: 83–7)

Or, in Jan Vermeer's *Woman Weighing Pearls*, the scales are empty, while on the wall behind her is a painting of the Last Judgment, as a sign stigmatizing those small luxuries and admonishing those who would seek them.

Twenty-first-century vanity collects phials of perfume and evokes seventeenth-century Dutch still-life paintings, like Philippe de Champaigne's *Vanitas* (dated 1655), in which a skull is placed between an hourglass and a tulip. Between 1634 and 1637 the tulip in Holland became a symbol of luxury, because it was the object of the most rampant financial speculation, which made many fortunes but then rapidly declined. Hence it symbolizes the theme of vanity in the art of the period and is juxtaposed with time (the hourglass) and death (the skull) in de Champaigne's painting.

Select clients by appointment populate the boutiques in which the new luxury encounters the vanitas of perfumes and makeup. In Florence, Lorenzo Villoresi measures out the rarest and most exclusive scents for extravagant tastes and prices. In Paris, at the Galerie Véro Dodat, amid antique dealers and collectors of dolls and precious gems, there are customized makeup shops that promise the most flattering colors and personalized lipsticks for the customers on their long waiting lists: haute couture for the skin. Indeed, luxury makeup is called *haute couleur* and consists of blends based on each client's unique individuality. And luxury is not intimidated by the elegant shapes of the bottles of miracle serums and the voluptuous names of perfumes now available in every duty-free shop, if you have a boarding pass and a credit card. The more cosmetics are associated

with high prices and a standardized luxury (and so are not luxurious enough), the greater the appreciation today of special handcrafted blends made to measure for your lips or cheeks. Beyond the extra logo at all costs, beyond the New Age naturalism of the last decades, luxury makeup today is a eulogy of the individual, gauged by the waiting time for an appointment.

Figure 10 Circus ticket office. © James Wojcik.

Figure 11 Traveling miniature shoes. © James Wojcik.

Conclusion

Luxury and capitalism, Protestant frugality and capitalism: in the early twentieth century, Werner Sombart and Max Weber fully recognized the society whose opulence and thrift they were respectively proclaiming. It was the sovereign West, the heart of a world without boundaries, the ideological and social model of certainties, convictions, and honorable stances. Today, however, the new luxury is turning the glove inside out, because the world itself has overturned the game: there is no longer center and periphery, but everything is simultaneously center and periphery; everything is image and likeness; everything appears to be defined and harmonious and yet simultaneously, abysmally discordant. Who hears, in the nonplaces of the supposedly structured dominant thought, the noises coming from the places of everyday life? How can we decode this diaspora of existence that overwhelms, dismantles, and then recomposes meanings and disciplines, bodies and rules, mythologies and reasons? The model of the Internet makes visible and tangible, and not just as a metaphor, the total disintegration of all presumed centrality and shows us how to reconfigure places starting from where one talks, looks, and lives. We live in mobile cartographies, more than fixed maps, where luxury deliberately challenges the very idea of space, life, limits.

Luxury moves the dark machinery of warfare and terror because it knows their laws: dissipation, dispossession, challenge. This happens in the name of real powers, globalized economies and finance, economies that devour politics. Human rights and citizenship either will be planetary or will not be at all, ending the violence of nation-states that transform minorities into a mass exodus. I'm speaking of the cultural cross-fertilizations and narratives of a modernity without fulfillment. But what is the point of feeling lost and confused if one can superimpose a freeze-frame on a champagne glass, as James Wojcik has done in his photography (see Figure 12)? It looks like a regal body with a diabolical soul inside. And I wonder: how can such an image be the image of this world? Or, rather, how does it narrate the world to me? I press play and let Wojcik's images

roll again: in another image (see Figure 13), a diamond and gold watch is submerged in a glass of champagne amid the euphoric bubbles: a splendid time machine lying on the crimson bed of a magic potion. There is a woman's decoration—a pair of earrings—around the stem of the crystal glass. The glass is crowned by a thorny leaf, which makes the image congenial to me, diminishing its sign value by removing its purpose and functionality. Is this the real? Like the photo, the imagery of luxury manages today to be the bending, disconcerting imperfection and dislocation of the predictable, because it places the unexpected in the most unimaginable places. So is this the real and its desert at one and the same time?

Luxury is both hated and loved. You can see it everywhere—from the affected gesture of a woman in the street to a table laden with the finest silver and china—and then you can lose sight of it again. Luxury is decadent and roaring, opulent and overflowing; it is the neoluxury of design and space, technology and travel; it is the eternal luxury of dispossessed bodies, of placated and never placated arms. It is the luxury of concrete sails (the Burj al Arab, a tower designed to mimic the sails of a ship) and artificial palms in the ocean (the Palm Islands, an artificial archipelago off the coast of Dubai); it is the fictions of place, the voluptuousness in a mirror. There is a luxury that creates taste and a luxury that disgusts: the cultural elites both feed on it and despise it. It exists in the stupidity that it tolerates and the genius that marks its limits. This book has followed the signs of luxury to where the brand name imposes its own laws and forges contemporary myth, to where it's hard to control words without letting them trick you. And yet, if you try to decode the distance separating word, truth, and fiction, then you are aware just how tentative is the conclusion of this journey into our common lives.

Figure 12 Zucchini flower. © James Wojcik.

Figure 13 Thorny leaf. © James Wojcik.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. “There all is order and beauty, / Luxury, peace, and pleasure.”
2. In Charles Baudelaire’s poem “Invitation au voyage” (Invitation to the Voyage).
3. I refer to the *là-bas* (“there”) of the opening verses: “Songe à la douceur / D’aller là-bas vivre ensemble!” (Think of the rapture / Of living together there!)
4. I am referring to the cutting of the eye in Luis Buñuel’s movie *Un chien andalou* (1929; An Andalusian Dog).
5. Antonio Gramsci has analyzed the difference between domination and hegemony, a classic analysis that is still relevant in the age of globalization. In his view domination is based only on the material force and power of the ruling classes, while hegemony has to do with the political and cultural elites’ construction of an intellectual and moral program ([1929–35] 1975: 2010–11 and passim).

CHAPTER 1 UNIQUENESS

1. The German sociologist Werner Sombart ([1913] 1967) maintained that luxury had been central for modern society since the origins of capitalist accumulation. According to Sombart’s analysis, the function of luxury for capitalism manifested itself through the complex transformation of the lifestyles of both the aristocracy and middle class during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He cynically espoused the “wasteful” spirit of capitalism, in opposition to Max Weber (1904–5), who highlighted the efficacy of this mode of production instead.
2. Translated by Lisa Adams.
3. Portman is the architect of the megastructures and spectacular hotels in Atlanta, Georgia; of the skyscrapers of Tomorrow Square in Shanghai; and of the business districts in Beijing and Shandong.
4. See Chapter 2.
5. The “obscurity” of luxury was the theme of an international conference held in Rome in October 1999, entitled “Il lusso, oscuro oggetto del desiderio,” which was organized by the Chair of Aesthetics of the University of Rome “Tor Vergata,” the Istituto Montecelio, and the Istituto Superiore per le Industrie Artistiche (ISIA) of Rome. Some of the papers have been published in issues 2 and 3 of the journal *Ágalma* (“Il lusso” 2002; “Modi e mode” 2002). On the idea of an obscure and subterranean magnificence, especially in relation to Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s architectural theories, see the paper by Sarah F. MacLaren (2002).
6. In semiotics, the relation between the plane of expression and the plane of content constitutes the sign function.
7. I refer here to Roland Barthes’s wonderful reflection on proper names in Marcel Proust (Barthes [1953]

1982: 118–31).

8. In an essay published in 1963 Roland Barthes defined the automobile as a common means of transport, at a time when the car was being transformed from a luxury good into a necessity in French imagery, even though only a small percentage of the population owned a car (Barthes [1963] 1998: 41–2). In this case "common" is an adjective that refers to people's familiarity with this object; in some cases the car became a myth, as for the Citroën Ds (see Barthes [1957] 1972: 88), or it became socially "marked," as for the 2CV (Barthes [1963] 1998: 43).
9. On the theme of court performances in Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the role of the stage as an instrument of the raison d'état (the higher principle of the state above the individual) in the Counter-Reformation, see Fontana 1972. For a visual text dealing with luxury at Versailles, see Roberto Rossellini's film *La prise du pouvoir par Louis XIV* (1966). In 2000 the director Roland Joffé cast a splendid Gérard Depardieu in *Vatel*, in which the actor plays François Vatel (1635–71), the master of ceremonies who was engaged by the Prince of Condé to prepare magnificent banquets and extraordinary choreographic apparatus for Louis XIV and his court, who would be guests for three nights at the Prince of Condé's castle in Chantilly. On luxury as the aesthetic representation of politics, see Compagno 1999.
10. On the relation between the representation of the sovereign's body and power, see Marin 1981.
11. *Culture jamming* is the practice of dethroning the messages of multinational brands through graffiti and the manipulation of billboards in order to transform advertisements into social and political indictments of those very same multinational corporations; see Klein 2001, Calefato and Giannone 2003, and Dagostino 2006, 2009.
12. For Benjamin fashion represented "the sex appeal of the inorganic," the greatest celebration of the fetishism of merchandise (Benjamin [1982] 1999: 79).
13. This is the lesson that market researchers pursue in their search for key words in order to predict and direct future social behavior that can then be channeled into clusters and clichés.
14. On the relation between consumption, everyday life, and communication, see Douglas and Isherwood 1979.
15. On the difference between the museum and the gallery, see Bourdieu [1979] 1983: 284.
16. See Bauzano 2000; the shoemaker in question is Silvano Lattanzi.
17. On fascination and fetishism, see Volli 1997; on feeling, see Perniola 1991.
18. The song is "Via del campo," and the verses go: "Dai diamanti non nasce niente, dal letame nascono i fior" (Nothing grows from diamonds, flowers grow from muck).

CHAPTER 2 WASTEFULNESS

1. In the film, set during the Vietnam War, three American soldiers are forced to play Russian roulette by their Vietcong guards.
2. The conflict is between the Hutu, who support the central government, and the Ugandan and Rwandan rebels; see International Rescue Committee, "IRC Study Shows Congo's Neglected Crisis Leaves 5.4 Million Dead; Peace Deal in N. Kivu, Increased Aid Critical to Reducing Death Toll" (n.d.), http://www.rescue.org/news/irc-study-shows-congos-neglected-crisis-leaves-54-million-dead-peace-deal-n-kivu-increased-aid--4331 (accessed November 2011).
3. See Chapter 4.
4. For the theme of the female sublime in myth, literature, cinema, and contemporary technological imagery, see Curti, Betti, and Carotenuto 2000.

CHAPTER 3 ETERNITY

CHAPTER 3 ETERNITY

1. The reference is to Serge Gainsbourg's "Babe alone in Babylone," composed in 1983 based on a movement by Brahms and sung by Jane Birkin.
2. This is a play on words between the literal meaning of the expression and the famous statue, the symbol of Rolls-Royce since 1911. The statue was designed by Charles Robinson Sykes, and according to legend it is a reference to the doomed love between the pioneer of motoring, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, and his secretary, Eleanor Velasco, the woman who inspired the female figure of the statue.
3. See http://www.rolls-roycemotorcars.com/.
4. The latest Thunderbird model came out in 2005.
5. The reference is to Fidel Castro's protection policy, which bans the exportation and scrapping of old American cars in Cuba, where oversized Cadillacs, Buicks, and Chevrolets from the 1950s and 1960s continue to be used, despite the shortage of fuel and spare parts. So paradoxically, on the one hand, they are anti-American symbols—that is, of how to conserve without destroying—while, on the other, they are signs of "Yankee" social imagery where you would least expect it, as the distance between political regimes is inverted in the symbolic proximity of the objects. These symbols are overladen with a luxury of meanings, not only because have they survived the U.S. embargo, but also because Cuba is now one of the very few places where these icons of the American way of life can be seen in real life, not just in old movies and TV series.
6. The Table X of the Twelve Roman Tables refers to sumptuary laws.
7. The film is a remake of *Death Takes a Holiday* (1934), with Fredric March as Death, which was inspired by Alberto Casella's homonymous play written in the 1920s.
8. Gianni Agnelli (1921–2003) was the principal shareholder of the Italian car manufacturer Fiat in the second half of the twentieth century.
9. "Le roi d'Italie est mort" was the headline in the newspaper *Liberation*.
10. Agnelli, who was an icon of worldliness in the 1960s and 1970s, used to spend part of his vacation in St. Moritz, a luxurious town in the Swiss mountains.
11. Rachael is the experimental replicant who believes she is human; she wears a black latex catsuit with big shoulder pads.
12. See Koolhaas 2001.
13. The building is 767 feet tall and has fifty-one floors; it cost US$820 million.
14. Jugendstil was the modern stylization of this image, an early twentieth-century version of luxury.
15. This section is dedicated to Benedetta Barzini (1943), an Italian model, writer, and teacher. She became a model in the 1960s, when she was very young. The image is a photograph by Norman Parkinson published in *Vogue Italia* (September 1968) and republished in *Vogue Italia Unique* (Barzini 2003).
16. The reference is to the title of Barzini's book (1993).
17. Lagerfeld's text was for an advertisement for Dentelles Solstiss.
18. Ibid.
19. The film is Wenders's "poetic interview" with Yamamoto. See Calefato 1999.
20. The "Diderot effect" is a social phenomenon that Grant McCracken (1990) named after the French philosopher Denis Diderot (1713–84). It relates to the way in which the objects of consumption create styles of living and create new needs.
21. On the artificiality and transparency of the postmodern body, see Maldonado 2002.
22. The idea of luxury as "not giving a damn" evokes Quentin Bell's extension of Veblen's concepts of conspicuous leisure, consumption, and waste to include "conspicuous outrage" (Bell [1947] 1992).
23. Fatema Mernissi defines Western harems as male stereotypes of Western women's bodies, for example, slimness and eternal youth (2001: 208–19). Mernissi also designed an interesting exhibition on Western and Eastern harems: *Fantasies de l'harem i noves Xahrazads* at the Centre de cultura contemporània de Barcelona (February 18–May 18, 2003).
24. In semiotics the mark of veridiction is a powerful sign on which the effect of truthfulness in discourse is

based. See Greimas [1983] 1985: 101–10.

25. According to Bataille ([1973] 1988), solidity contains a principle of conservation, while sovereignty expresses the principle of loss, dissipation.

CHAPTER 4 LEISURE AND TRAVEL

1. Walter Benjamin ([1982] 1999: 800) distinguishes between the German words *Musse* (leisure) and *Müssiggang* (idleness): "Whoever enjoys leisure (*Musse*) escapes Fortuna; whoever embraces idleness (*Müssiggang*) falls under her power."
2. The Adventure Network International website is found at http://www.adventure-network.com.
3. "As great as the sea" was the slogan for a Costa Crociere advertisement.
4. Louis Vuitton has sponsored this regatta for challengers of the America's Cup since 1983.
5. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is the title of a book by Hunter S. Thompson, which was first published serially in *Rolling Stone* magazine and then appeared in book form (1971). It recounts the delirious trip (in every sense) to Las Vegas of Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo (actually Hunter's nickname). The visionary director Terry Gilliam made a film of the book in 1998, starring Johnny Depp as Raoul and Benicio Del Toro as Dr. Gonzo.
6. *Il Tempo scopre la Verità* (1743; Time Reveals the Truth) is a famous painting by Giambattista Tiepolo, now in the Museo Civico in Vicenza.
7. The exhibition was curated by Valerie Steele, director of the Fashion Institute of Technology museum.
8. Translated by Lisa Adams.
9. This is a free interpretation of the depiction of a dandy's journey in an article by the journalist John Arlidge (2003).
10. In Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (1987), the songlines are invisible trajectories in the Australian wilderness that the Aborigines follow, singing of the Dreamtime of their ancestors.
11. *Acqua di Cristo* is the water from underground springs in the calcareous rock formations near the sea.
12. "The Turks" in the Apulian dialect.
13. This is a typical regional dish of rice, potatoes, and mussels cooked in an oven in an earthenware pot called a *tiedd* in the local dialect.

CHAPTER 5 WELLNESS

1. The description in the text is a collage of houses belonging to Al Pacino, Ron Howard, Puff Daddy, Eric Clapton, and Michael Douglas.
2. A twenty-four-carat gold leaf is laid over the center of this rice dish.
3. For Brillat-Savarin the sixth sense is "genesiac or physical love, which attracts the sexes to each other, and the object of which is the reproduction of the species" ([1826] 2004: 13).
4. The Danish title is "Babette's Gaestebud." In 1987 a film with the same title was released; it is particularly faithful, even in its details, to the literary text.
5. Translated by Lisa Adams.
6. The Paris Commune was a socialist government established after a popular uprising in March 1871. It was bloodily suppressed by the French army at the end of May in the same year.
7. See Sombart ([1913] 1967: 99), on the increase in the consumption of sweets in Europe in the sixteenth century, especially sugar and cacao, and its relation to colonialism. See Sombart ([1913] 1967: 21) also on the close connection between the rise of luxury in Europe and slavery in the colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

8. Benjamin speaks of the thermal bath as a *passage* and of the use of water in cures as a "*rite de passages*, a transitional experience" ([1982] 1999: 409). The places mentioned here, to which Benjamin refers (410, 411), are Schuls Tarasp in Engadina and the springs at Karlsbad, also mentioned by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his poetry.
9. The word *spa* in English, meaning thermal baths, comes from the city in Belgium called Spa, which has thermal baths.
10. The hotel and baths belong to the municipality of Vals in the canton of Graubünden.
11. Odette de Crecy is a character in Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* (*Du côté de chez Swann*; [1913] 1922). In the novel, her elegance and beauty are described in detail.

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The names of some fashion designers have been included only when they are the names of persons, not brands. The names of characters in films or books are followed by the name of the work in which they appear.